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Milestone

Volume 9 2011

Art & Literature Review

Creative Expressions of Western North Carolina Artists & Writers

Southwestern Community College

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Mission Statement

Milestone is the biennial art and literature review published by Southwestern Community College. The purpose of this publication is to showcase the creative expressions of Western North Carolina artists and writers.

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Gene Norton
Michael Revere
Bob Satterwhite

Acknowledgments

We wish to recognize the following individuals:

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Gene Couch
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Cecil Groves
Sonja Haynes
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We offer a special "thank you" to Phil Weast and the SCC Student Life Committee for funding this publication. We also wish to thank Cheryl Contino-Conner and Student Support Services for funding the *Milestone* banquet.

Dedication

This retrospective edition of the *Milestone* is dedicated to Allan Grant and Bob Satterwhite, whose inspiration and expertise will be missed....

Milestone: A Retrospective

Introduction

Milestone is a biennial publication of Southwestern Community College (SCC). The periodical was created to showcase the works of writers and visual artists in the region. Many interested parties at SCC had recognized for years that literary and artistic talent was abundant in the institution's service area, but very few opportunities existed for these persons to publish their work. Thus, *Milestone* was created to offer such an opportunity.

This 2010-11 edition commemorates the efforts of *Milestone* staff, other support groups, and individuals, along with the artists and writers themselves, who have made this publication a reality for the past thirteen years. Following is a brief overview of the evolution of *Milestone*.

I. The Early Years

The origins of *Milestone* can be traced back to the early 1980s. Several attempts in the past had been made to provide a means for artists and writers to publish their work, notably the SCC periodical *Pen and Ink*, which last appeared in 1991. However, this publication was restricted to students who attended the college at the time and lacked secure funding, so the publication schedule was erratic. Hence, opportunities for development were limited. For the 1991 edition of *Pen and Ink*, Bob Harrison, SCC English instructor, functioned as faculty advisor while James Lyle, SCC student, served as Art Director.

In 1998, under the direction of Dr. Joe Barwick, who was then Vice President of Instructional Services, a group of interested parties was assembled to publish a new periodical. This publication accepted submissions not only from SCC students but also from writers within the college's service area: Jackson, Macon, and Swain counties and the Qualla Boundary. Original visual art also was included. Michael Revere, SCC student and one of the periodical's founders, served as editor while Chris Cox and Owen Gibby, SCC English instructors, functioned as faculty advisors. This magazine, which was funded by the SCC Student Government Association (SGA, later, Student Life Committee) was compiled in the Print Shop at SCC and was published in spring of 1999. It was entitled the *Art and Literature Review of Southwestern Community College*. The first banquet was held, cash prizes were awarded, and free copies were disseminated. These traditions continue today.

This first edition of the magazine, which later would become *Milestone*, was fifty-three pages in length and was printed in black and white. Five hundred copies were printed, and because of the limited length, were staple-bound. Many upgrades were made over the years, but the criteria for publication, most of which remain in place today, were established by the staff of this first periodical. Much credit must be accorded to Revere for his work in these early years. During this time, he also wrote a style guide for planning, compiling, and publishing a literary magazine.

The second edition of the *SCC Art and Literature Review* was published in spring of 2000. Roger Stephens, SCC Advertising & Graphic Design instructor, became art and layout advisor; Allan Grant, SCC English instructor, joined the staff as literary advisor; and Beth Riesz, SCC student, served as editor. A minimal color cover was the major innovation for this second edition. In 2000, after a contest among SCC students, the name of the periodical was changed to *Milestone*. The third edition was published in 2001, and, once again, a SCC student, Barbara Austin, served as editor.

II. Growth

Due to funding and printing challenges, these early editions of *Milestone* were limited to sixty pages and were staple-bound on campus. However, because of production problems and the desire by many to expand the scope of the periodical, the 2001-02 *Milestone* staff explored options for upgrades. With additional funding secured from the SCC Foundation, the 2001-02 edition was expanded to 115 pages. The near-doubling in length provided opportunities for additional writers and artists to publish their work but also required outsourcing for printing and binding of the periodical since such an upgrade required a "perfect" or glue bind, a production feature not available at the SCC Print Shop. Thus, the 2001-02 edition of *Milestone* is significant as the first expanded edition which provided the template for publication still used today. Also, a key addition to the *Milestone* production staff in 2001 was Toni Knott, current Coordinator of the SCC Learning Assistance Center and instructor, who has served as editor of the periodical ever since.

With expansion, the periodical incurred significantly increased costs, so funding became one of the project's greatest challenges. Because the *Milestone* Advisory Committee was unable to secure the funding necessary for improvements, production of the periodical was suspended for one year. However, the staff was able to obtain funding to publish issues of *Milestone* in 2004 and 2005. During this period, the number of copies printed also was increased to seven hundred.

Another key addition to the *Milestone* staff during this time was Lisa Fisher, current Graphic Artist at SCC, who was responsible for layout and design. She continues to serve in this capacity; she also later began serving as co-managing editor with Knott. The 2004 edition was also the first to use multiple colors for the cover. In 2004, Bob Keeling, current SCC Advertising & Graphic Design instructor, first worked on the project and became Art Director in 2005.

Because of limited funding opportunities, the Advisory Committee entered into an agreement with the Student Life Committee (SLC, formerly SGA) in 2005 to publish *Milestone* biennially. As mentioned earlier, the SGA had provided the bulk of the funding for most of the periodical's history, and in 2005, the SLC, directed by Dr. Phil Weast, Dean of Student Services, agreed to provide most of the secure funding for biennial publication. Additional editions were then published in 2007 and 2009 based upon this partnership.

III. Current Production

Over the past decade, the *Milestone* staff has continued to pursue opportunities for expansion. Upgrades in production, such as interior color, have been proposed, but

such improvements are currently cost prohibitive. The staff, in conjunction with the SCC Office of Public Information, also has increased promotion of the periodical over the years and continues to explore options for improvement in this area, as well as more efficient methods for dissemination of copies.

The number of copies printed for the 2010-11 edition is one thousand, the most ever. This increased print run has been made possible by continued support of funding sources—Weast and SLC; Student Support Services, which has funded the *Milestone* banquet for the past several years, directed by Cheryl Contino-Conner; and donations from the SCC College Foundation, provided by *Milestone* supporters. The staff continues to pursue opportunities for additional funding as well.

With the exceptions of outsourcing and biennial publication, the production of *Milestone* has remained consistent over the past thirteen years. Every two years the *Milestone* staff meets at the beginning of fall semester to plan production. A press release is written and sent to the SCC Office of Public Information, which then forwards this "call for submissions" to newspapers throughout the region. *Milestone* is also advertised on the SCC website and through other media within the college. The deadline for submissions is the first week in December.

The staff meets in January to select submissions and prize winners. Letters are then sent to all who submitted and invitations to the *Milestone* banquet, which is held in late April or early May, are sent. The major production stage begins in March as the editors and designers lay out the magazine and obtain bids for printing. The chosen printer then delivers the finished product to SCC before the banquet, at which time prizes are awarded and copies are given to all in attendance. Additional copies are disseminated in various locations and to other interested parties thereafter.

The staff has always felt that *Milestone* should not be a project that seeks profit, so copies are free, a service to all persons who have an interest in the publication. The staff also believes that advertising within the magazine devalues its aesthetic appeal and thus rejects this form of fundraising.

The *Milestone* project has survived and flourished through challenging economic times over the past thirteen years, and it is our hope that the periodical will continue to evolve and be published throughout the foreseeable future. Whether written or visual, art requires an audience. Thus, it is our goal to continue providing this opportunity for area artists and writers to have the means necessary to display their talents.

May the future of *Milestone* be a fruitful one!

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PAUL SLAGLE
FIRST PLACE ~ ART

Voice and Whisper (My Return)

George Frizzell

First place ~ poetry

after all these years
who was walking
in the shadows
of my return

the light in the window
left dead moths

the thought of you
in the shadows
of my return

a moth wing fluttered
on spiderless web

I heard you call

Off Rez

Billie Jo Rich

First place ~ Short Story

My uncle knew this guy when he was young, in the seventies when he was still living on the reservation. He must've been about fourteen or so at that time. In those days, he was always outside running around, hanging from a tree limb by his knees, or sitting beneath the rickety front porch in the dark, reading comic books with a dim flashlight. It was from this location that he heard most of the goings-on. Gramps would sit on the porch talking to visitors while Grandma stayed inside and made food for everyone: tender bean dumplings wrapped in hickory leaves, golden fatback slices with crunchy rind, fried potatoes, and crispy trout. Adults sat on the front porch sipping strong black coffee and talking about important things as cigarette smoke swirled around their heads and then drifted away. Around the lowered voices, darkness settled in and night mist crept into the mountains.

The scenic beauty of the land was and still is the main reason the rez became a favorite destination for nature lovers seeking recreation and photographers seeking material. Near the edge of the reservation was a camp located beside a small lake. During the summer months, groups kept the facility booked for retreats, summer camps, and the like.

This guy my uncle knew—his name was Jimmy Lee—was a friend from way back. They grew up together on the small reservation, swimming and fishing in the small lake through summer months and walking the mile to catch the school bus in the winter. Back then, very few of the main roads were actually paved. Most were narrow, winding roads that twisted up the sides of mountains through dense woods, becoming impossible to travel on days of snow and ice. Often, my uncle and Jimmy Lee would much rather walk to the main road through the cold than spend a winter day at home, chopping wood for the fire.

Jimmy Lee lived with his full-blooded grandparents on the north side of the mountain in their bare house that was painted the same sickly green as pistachio ice cream. Many of the houses were painted that same color in those days; apparently the tribal housing program had gotten quite a deal on a large amount of that particular shade of paint. No one ever really said what had become of Jimmy Lee's parents, why he was with his grandparents. Many families had that same arrangement, and it didn't seem unusual.

Jimmy Lee was a lanky boy with a soft voice who rarely spoke. A shock of thick, dark hair fell over one side of his forehead, just brushing the rim of his dark-framed glasses. His grandparents kept him dressed neatly in tough-skin jeans and plaid shirts from Sears. His clothing was a little different from the tee-shirts and flared jeans that all the other kids wore, but he was handsome in his own way. The girls from school liked him well enough, even though he was awkward, was shy, and rarely spoke to them.

Through the years, Jimmy Lee had built the reputation as a quiet but solid young man in the community, the type of boy who mowed everyone's lawn and stayed out of trouble. Jimmy Lee never caused any problems for his aging grandparents. If anything, everyone agreed that he was a fine young man who helped his grandparents around the house with chores and with money from his part-time job.

But one summer, things changed for everyone on the rez.

The 4-H groups from several surrounding counties had their campout by the lake as they did every year. Sometime during the first night, someone had entered the group leaders' cabin and stolen some of their food. A note was left telling them that five girls were going to be killed. They laughed it off as a joke, each suspecting the other as the writer of the note.

Early the next morning just before dawn, the group leaders heard screams. In one of the bunks, a girl had awakened to find that two of her bunkmates lay dead in their bloody beds, their eyes wide and staring at nothing. The other two were gone. A search of the area around the camp yielded the gruesome discovery of the bodies of the other two girls, bloody and naked, with their small, pale hands bound with rope. The girls were in the youngest group in the camp: eight, nine, and ten years old. Since they were the youngest, their bunk was closest to the adults, who never heard anything unusual during the night.

Local and federal authorities launched a full-scale investigation. In an old, dilapidated barn near the edge of the property where Jimmy Lee lived, a length of rope similar to that which bound the girls' hands was found along with a bloody knife, some flashlights, and a few old novels and comic books. It seemed certain that the reclusive Jimmy Lee was the culprit.

The grieving community was shocked to hear who the suspect was, and elders immediately convened to discuss the matter. Of course, everyone had known Jimmy Lee since he was a baby, and it was damn near impossible to even blink an eye on the small reservation without at least two or three folks knowing that you blinked. So everyone felt pretty sure that they knew Jimmy Lee better than any outsiders, and none of the locals really believed he was capable of such violence. No one had ever seen Jimmy Lee with a knife. Besides, said my uncle, when they fished or hunted together, Jimmy Lee always took his catch home to be cleaned by his grandmother.

When law enforcement came looking, families on the rez hid Jimmy Lee. It wasn't that anyone wanted to break the law; it was just that they didn't think he was guilty. They were simply protecting one of their own. If the folks on the rez had believed Jimmy Lee to be guilty, they would have handled that in their own way as well. The sheriff, who was native himself, knew what was going on, but since they couldn't find Jimmy Lee, they couldn't do much about it. He finally put the word out that whoever was found to be aiding Jimmy Lee would pay the consequences. When word of this got around, the elders made another decision. It was now last resort, and some among them would help Jimmy Lee in a different way.

On a hot summer night, the barking and baying of eager bloodhounds echoed through the valleys and mountains, eerie in the darkness. From his front yard, my uncle could see small circles of light moving through the distant trees. A group of armed men, including the sheriff and several federal investigators, searched the woods for Jimmy Lee, who was wanted for questioning. The dogs lit on a scent; their noses went skyward, and their mouths shaped like an "o" as they brayed in triumph. Men were pulled along behind the rushing dogs, and circles of light bounced along as they ran across uneven ground behind the dogs. The group was led, twisting and turning, around trees and along streams, until the men were out of breath.

At last they came to a small cave entrance hidden behind some brush on the side of the mountain. The dogs started to go crazy near the cave. The men trained powerful lights at the entrance, and two or three ventured in slowly with weapons drawn. A few moments later, they emerged, shaking their heads in disappointment. One of the men was carrying a rooster tucked under one arm, which flapped away into the night when he set it down. The dogs strained at the ends of their leashes after the fowl, barking and snapping as spit and foam dripped from their jaws.

The determined men continued their search through the night, and sometime in the early morning hours, the dogs alerted again. They had picked up another trail. This time the hounds led the men straight over a hill and across a clearing to a huge oak tree, where the dogs strained up onto the tree's massive trunk and barked furiously upward. Their powerful neck muscles bulged, and their claws scrabbled against the tree. The large group of men surrounded the tree and shone flashlights into the branches, inspecting each and every limb, but there was no one and no thing up in that tree. After a thorough search of the tree and the area surrounding it, the weary men trudged back to load the dogs in the trucks and head home. Some of the men noticed that when the group left the massive oak tree, they had one more dog than they had arrived with, but no one knew who it belonged to, and it wore no collar. When the last vehicle drove away into the early light of morning, the lone dog trotted off into the misty woods.

The search for Jimmy Lee dwindled to nearly nothing within the next year. It seemed as if it would be impossible to find him. The one and only suspect seemed to disappear.

Two years after the murder, an off-duty deputy was hunting in the mountains when he came upon an old abandoned cabin in the woods. It had been there for a long time and was really useful for nothing but maybe a shelter from the rain, but he noticed a small stream of smoke coming from the chimney. On a hunch, he immediately turned and went into town for some backup. When the group returned to the cabin, they kicked in the flimsy door to find a surprised-looking Jimmy Lee smoking a cigarette and listening to a rock-and-roll oldies station on the radio. After being on the run all this time, Jimmy Lee's freedom had ended. An emaciated and pale-looking Jimmy Lee was led out of the filthy cabin in handcuffs. He went peacefully and did not resist.

These were the days before complex crime-scene investigation, and DNA evidence testing was still in its infancy, even in big cities. A long trial ended with Jimmy Lee being acquitted. It was what everyone on the rez expected to happen, but it was a shock to surrounding communities. There had never been any suspect other than the shy Indian with the dark-framed glasses.

About a year or so after the murder trial, Jimmy Lee was arrested and convicted of raping a young woman and was sentenced to time in federal prison. About three months after he began serving his term, he was walking at the edge of the exercise yard and suddenly fell to the ground. Two of the inmates swore that they saw dark shadows swirl around Jimmy Lee right before he fell. They cowered against the fence and screamed for the guards, who came at a sprint. When the guards reached Jimmy Lee he was dead, his mouth open in a scream that no one had heard.

The sheriff was certain that the elders used "Indian medicine" to help Jimmy Lee evade capture. Many people on the rez believed that some of the elders who practiced "medicine" had taught Jimmy Lee some tricks, but whether he killed those little girls or not, from that time on, he was never truly a free man again. The camp is still there but has never been used again and today sits abandoned, grown over with brush and weeds. The murder of the little girls was never solved.

On a positive note, my uncle has moved back from the city, and the local 4-H has rented the big empty field near his house for a campout next summer.

Stephen Sanders

Second Place ~ Art

Blue Kettle Tea My Blessed Daughter

James Cox

Second place ~ poetry

The eastern sky
stands behind the Sandia Mountains,
but in the west a thunderhead approaches.
Teresa Chino comes down from the mesa
to dig soft stone for her pottery.
After the day's work,
tired from the carry and the walk,
she climbs the sandstone steps to Sky City,
ancient Acoma pueblo.
She looks forward to her daughter's tea
made in the blue kettle:
they eat bread baked in a clay oven,
and strips of elk stewed all day
with carrots, potatoes, and wild onions.
In the evening, in sand by the door,
they draw designs
lit by moonlight and firelight,
their eyes in shadow, their hearts free.
The next morning, all through the day,
they grind the stone
to make the powder to make the clay.

Mother

Shelly Nixon

Second place ~ Short Story

Whenever I got sick, my mom was the one who took care of me. She would lay one of her cool, smooth hands across my forehead and the other across her own. Frowning slightly she would proclaim that I did indeed have a mild fever. Confined to the bed or the living room couch for the rest of the day, I would read, color, or watch television. Around noon Mom would bring me a piece of toast on a saucer and a cup of tea—Lipton's black tea with just a dribble of cool water and a spoon leaning against the side of the cup.

My mom was and still is a caretaker, of everyone and everything.

My mom cleans. She mops the kitchen floor once a week. She scrubs the bathroom once a week. She does three loads of laundry once a week—my brother's, my father's, and hers. She runs the dishwasher every night, carefully loading the dishes into their little compartments and filling the soap dish with lemon-scented Cascade. The pots and pans she washes by hand. She fills the sink with hot water and directs three squirts of lemon Joy into the steady stream from the faucet. After they are scrubbed clean with a washcloth, she rinses them in hot water and sets them out to dry on a towel that she has spread across the counter top. She washes the handle on the refrigerator door. She washes the knobs on the stove. She washes the receiver on our beige rotary telephone.

Every night before she goes to bed, my mother packs a lunch for my father. Celery or carrot sticks in one bag, an apple or banana in another bag, and additional vegetables from the garden in a third bag. Sometimes, she puts a low-fat cookie in another bag. She uses plastic, no-brand sandwich bags. Ziploc bags are too expensive and are reserved only for the food she freezes. She places each bag on the top rack of the refrigerator for the next day.

Every night before she goes to bed, she leaves notes on the table. She writes them on old church bulletins, fliers, and newsletters that she has torn into four equally sized squares. She keeps a stack of them on the window sill close to the phone. One note is always for my brother: "Eric, what time do you want me to get you up in the morning? Love, Mom." One is for my father: "Frank, there are vegetables and a sandwich in the refrigerator for your lunch tomorrow. Love, Rose." Occasionally, there is a note for me: "Shelly, don't forget to make your credit card's monthly payment. Love, Mom."

In the morning, she tries to get my brother out of bed. She starts pounding on the door to his basement room an hour before his written time. "Eric, it's time to get up." He curses at her. She lets him sleep for another ten minutes, and then she tries again. Eventually, after an hour, he gets out of bed. He curses at her some more, complaining that she did not iron his work uniform or pack his lunch. She promptly does both of these things so that he can leave for his job on time. He works part time as a bouncer and part time as a limousine driver.

Sometimes she pays his bills. He used to have an apartment. When his roommate moved out, she paid the extra rent. When his car breaks down (he has had six so far), she pays for the repairs. When the credit-card company calls about his overdue notice, she takes the call. If he does not have enough money for the monthly payment, she pays it for him.

My mom is devoutly religious: Roman Catholic. Every Saturday at 4 p.m., we would get ready for church. Since we always went to Communion, we were not allowed to eat after that time. Mass did not start until 5 p.m. For an hour, we would watch bowling while my dad slept in his chair. We went to church every Holy Day. We went to CCD every Sunday. Mom was the coordinator, so we had to be there an hour early. Sometimes, I would clean all the chalkboards in the partitioned rooms with paper towels and water. Sometimes I would listen to the radio that was supposed to be used for playing religious tapes. Sometimes I would drink hot chocolate that she left out for the teachers while I watched her work.

Mom is still the coordinator. Every June she makes lists of potential teachers and starts calling them. Classes do not start until October. By September she has worn down most of the candidates and only has one or two slots left to fill. In September she also starts shopping for supplies. She makes long lists of every item that the program has and every item that it needs. She goes through the Sunday ads for all the stores in the greater Flint area: Office Max, Office Depot, Target, Meijer, and the local drugstore Fairway. She makes more lists, comparing prices. She then makes final lists telling her where to buy each item and how many of each item to buy. She saves receipts for reimbursement. When she is done shopping, she makes a supply box for every grade: kindergarten through twelfth. Each is an old cigar box covered with contact paper. Inside she puts a class list, attendance sheet, chalkboard eraser, and pencils. One pencil for each student plus three extra pencils. She sharpens all of them by hand.

Every Christmas I buy her a calendar, careful to get one with large squares. The day after Christmas, she sits down at the kitchen table with her old calendar and her new calendar. She copies all the birthdays and anniversaries onto the new calendar. Aunts, uncles, cousins, nieces, nephews, grandparents—she leaves no one out. My mom is the oldest of twelve children, and my father is the second oldest of seven. We have a large family. At the beginning of each month, she sits again at the table, this time with her address book, postage stamps, a box of cards, her typewriter, and her calendar. She writes a card for each anniversary and birthday that month. She types the address on the front of the envelope. She mails each card at least one week in advance so that it will not arrive late.

I used to think that my mom was boring. I could not understand why she spent so much time making lists, cleaning, and going to church. It seemed like such a waste of time. We did not get along. Every time I went somewhere, she had to know where I would be, who I would be with, what time I would be home, and the phone number where I could be reached in case of emergency. I hated going to church and CCD every

weekend. I wanted to stay home and read my books or go out with my friends. I wanted to quit religion class altogether, but she would not let me.

I could not understand why my mom spent so much time taking care of other people. They never appreciate the things she does for them. My brother curses at her. My father takes for granted that she will pack his lunch every day. My relatives never send her birthday or anniversary cards. I thought that she did not spend enough time doing things for herself.

Now, I live by myself. At the beginning of every month, I print out a calendar. On each square, I record the assignments and tests for each class. I also record the dates when my rent and my phone bill are due. At the beginning of every month, I go shopping for cards. I buy one for each of my three grandmothers and send them a week in advance. I do not want them to feel as if I have forgotten about them. I take my neighbor to Meijer once a week because she cannot drive. When my ex-boyfriend does not have the money to pay for his car insurance, I pay it for him. When his car breaks down, I pay for the repairs. He has difficulty holding down a job. When he does not have enough money for groceries, I buy them for him. I do my dishes every other day. I clean the bathroom every other week. I do laundry once a week. I dust and vacuum every week. I make lists of things to take before I go on a trip. I make a list of all the things I need to buy before I go shopping.

It is night, and I am dreaming. I am looking at an old photo album filled with pictures of my mother. The first picture is in black and white. She is wearing a sweater and a plaid, pleated skirt that falls below her knees. She is sitting straight-backed in a wicker chair. Her hands are folded across her lap. She is wearing glasses and smiling slightly. She looks about eighteen.

In the next picture, she has taken off her glasses and is smiling more. She looks more relaxed. I turn the page. The next few pictures show her smiling broadly. She is not wearing her glasses, and she has thrown her legs over the arm of the chair. She has also begun to show more of herself—first a knee and then a shoulder, eventually a breast.

I notice as I keep turning the pages that the pictures are becoming more colorized. Her skin is flushed, no longer the grey of black-and-white photography. Her eyes are becoming brilliantly blue. She is starting to get out of the chair. I keep turning the pages, watching my mother slowly undress for some unknown photographer. I am angry.

Then I notice her eyes are changing color. They are turning grey-green. Her hair is growing longer and beginning to curl. Her cheekbones are becoming less pronounced and her nose, larger. I keep turning the pages.

When I reach the last page in the photo album, I stare at it for a long time. The only picture on the page is a full-sized, full-color portrait. The woman in the photo is completely nude. She is standing upright, laughing with her head thrown back and her hair flying around her face.

I realize the woman in the photo is me.

Amberly Rogers

trying each other on

Mike Park

it doesn't take much
&
i am right back in that place

such a strange, sleepy town
that seeps into the blood
&
refuses to change beyond
a howling weep or yawn

i've been branded by
its serene indifference

battered by that deep blue backdrop
who held me in her arms
night after miserable night

when the sun sent
an imposter in its place
&
forced us into all our
ill-fitting masks

embarking on adulthood
just as foolishly as before

too human to succeed
yet too stupid
to ever turn back

The Old Oak Table

Karen Gilfillan

Old oak has felt it all
Tales of joy with hand-slapping emphasis

Sensed the soft clasp of hands
during an evening prayer of thanks

Shook with the slams of clenched fists
when a decisive point was voiced

Tears of frustration have dripped
onto its polished sheen

Scars of candle drippings
Rings of hot coffee mugs

Sturdy flared legs chewed on
by rambunctious puppies

If only old oak could speak
of life lived in the family

Misty Lackey

Vita Nations

Sipping Hot Chocolate

Laura Elliott

There are women in Iran imprisoned and brutalized for speaking their truth, and here I sit, warm and comfortable, sipping hot chocolate in a cozy café, with the freedom to choose small, medium, or large, with the freedom to choose from which window I watch the beauty of the snow fall—and with the freedom to choose how much to speak my truth, but for the prison of my tamed heart.

Slothful I feel, recalling Thoreau's words to Emerson during the Mexican-American War. When his good friend asked him, "What are you doing in there?" Thoreau responded, through the window of his prison cell, "What are you doing out there?"

LAUREN MEDFORD

Truth

Thomas Rain Crowe

for Walt Johnson

"What aint the truth is a lie,"
the old man would say.
Years went by
and I began to notice how
for some things to live
other things died.
How the food in my garden grew
side by side with the weeds. How
the hawk hunted the rabbit, and yet
the rabbits lived!
Now I know. I have seen it in my own face.
And in the eyes of the smallest ant, or
in the grace of a bird on the wing:
that the truth is the shape of a ring.
All of us equal, and all of us only
one thing.

Old Howard's Gap Road
Polk County, NC
1980

From the Mouths of Babes

Steve Brady

They sure were leaving Aunt Gertrude's house in a hurry. Breanna's mother pulled her down the sidewalk to the car so fast that the toes of her sneakers skidded and bounced over the concrete. Behind them, Aunt Gertrude glared around the door and slammed it shut as they sped away.

Earlier that morning Leah and Breanna cruised through the Cowee Gap and plunged down the Macon County side of the mountain headed for a visit with Aunt Gertrude in Franklin.

Leah said, "I want you to mind your P's and Q's, young lady."

"Billy Jones stuck peas up his nose," Breanna said. "He had to sit in timeout."

"No, honey, it's not food; it's an expression that means 'be good.'"

"Why?"

"I don't know; I guess we'll have to Google that one."

Aunt Gertrude was a sister of Leah's grandmother. Both Leah's grandmother and mother had passed away, and she felt that the duty to maintain contact with the older generation of the family had been passed down to her. Leah didn't know her relatives in Franklin very well. She had grown up in Asheville and they only met at occasional reunions, but she remembered Aunt Gertrude all too well. She admitted to Breanna's father that she was torn between guilt and dread at the thought of a visit with Aunt Gertrude, but guilt finally won the battle.

When Leah and Breanna arrived at Aunt Gertrude's, they crept along in the wake of the old woman's massive girth as she pushed her walker down the hall and ushered them into the living room.

"Aunt Gertrude, this is Breanna," Leah said.

"Well," Aunt Gertrude said, "if you ain't the spitting image of your mother."

Breanna said, "I'm not supposed to spit; it's nasty."

"Oh, the things children say," Aunt Gertrude said. "How old are you, Breanna?"

"Three and a half." She held up three fingers. "How old are you, Aunt Gertrude? You're real wrinkly."

"That's not polite," Leah said.

"Don't worry," Aunt Gertrude said. "I could never take offense at a child; as The Bible says: *from the mouths of babes....*"

Leah asked, "How have you been feeling?"

Aunt Gertrude let loose a sigh that sounded like the tires of an eighteen wheeler deflating. "Terrible; I've got this swelling in my legs, and I'm down in my back. I get them pain shots in my spine ever three months, but it don't help none."

"I'm sorry," Leah said.

"It sure was nice of you to come for a visit," Aunt Gertrude said. "Nobody ever comes to see me."

"Doesn't most of your family live here in Franklin?"

"Well, yeah, but they don't come by, and when they do, they just can't wait to leave. Ain't that awful?"

Leah nodded and tried to look sympathetic while Breanna squirmed on the edge of the couch beside her and kicked the air.

Aunt Gertrude said, "It's been hard since Claude passed. Sometimes it seems like he's still right down there in the basement; I don't know what he done down there all the time. I told him to stay up here so I could keep an eye on him; he had that bad heart, you know, and I couldn't get up and down the steps to check on him on account of my bad hip."

When she finally paused for breath, a humming sound filled the silence.

"What's that noise?" Breanna asked.

"That's the Frigidaire," Aunt Gertrude said.

"Why's it so loud?"

"Cause it's old, honey."

"Is that why you're so loud?"

Aunt Gertrude looked Breanna up and down and reconsidered the wisdom of that Biblical passage she had quoted earlier.

Leah said, "Why don't you look around, Breanna? But, remember, don't touch."

Breanna wandered around the living room and gawked at all the bric-a-brac. Ceramic figurines of angels, chickens, dogs, and cats cluttered the tables and shelves. Framed portraits of family members obscured nearly every inch of wall space. It looked like those shops in Asheville where her mother refused to let go of her hand.

Meanwhile, Aunt Gertrude was saying, "I hollered down the steps at Claude day and night to check up on him, but he didn't answer. Said he couldn't hear me. I said, 'Claude, if you wouldn't leave your hearing aides up here by the sink ever time you go down there, you could hear me just fine,' but he didn't listen and then...good Lord!"

Aunt Gertrude's eyes bugged out, and she clutched her hands to her chest. Breanna was spinning around, flying two ceramic chickens above her head with sweeping arm motions. Leah rushed over and pried them from her grasp.

"Don't' touch."

"I wasn't," Breanna said. "They were flying."

Aunt Gertrude snorted. "Good Lord, child. Don't you know chickens can't fly?"

"Why do they have wings?" Breanna asked.

"Never mind," Leah said. "We'll Google that later. Don't interrupt."

Aunt Gertrude sniffed a few times and said, "Where was I? Oh, yeah, I told Claude he was going to have a heart attack down there all by himself one day, and I was right. He went down there early one Saturday and didn't come up all day. I like to hollered myself blue in the face. Around supper time I called Buster, and he come over and found him dead down there. Ain't that awful?"

"It certainly is," Leah said.

Breanna asked, "Do chickens sleep in beds?"

Aunt Gertrude rolled her eyes.

"No," Leah said, "they sleep in chicken coops."

"Why?"

"Well, uh...maybe they can't lie down on their wings. Let's talk about it later. You interrupted again. I'm sorry, Aunt Gertrude, please go on."

And on and on, she thought.

"So like I was saying...." Aunt Gertrude sniffed a few more times. "I was up here hollering for Claude while he was down there in the basement dying on that cold, linoleum floor all alone, not able to hear the sound of my voice for comfort as he drawed his last breath, just like I told him it would happen, not that it give me any satisfaction. Ain't that awful?"

"Just awful," Leah said.

"When they carried Claude up the basement steps, he had this big grin plastered on his face. That one paramedic feller said it was probably the way his face froze in his final agony, but it could've all been avoided if...no, no, no!"

Aunt Gertrude clutched her chest again. Breanna was flying two angels around, like the chickens. Leah bolted off the couch and snagged them before they fell to earth.

"I said, don't touch."

"You said, don't touch the chickens."

"Well, I meant don't touch *any* of Aunt Gertrude's things. You're going to have to sit on the couch with me and behave whether you like it or not. I'm so sorry, Aunt Gertrude, please go on."

Aunt Gertrude sucked her cheeks in and out and chuffed like a ruptured steam locomotive laboring to pull out of the station.

"Well, like I was saying, they don't listen to me, and Buster is just like his daddy. When he got engaged to that Betty Sue Lindsey, I told him she was nothing but a tramp, and look how that turned out. She run off with that carnival feller and left him all alone with little Felicia and Junior."

"That's too bad," Leah said. "How old were Felicia and Junior when that happened?"

"Twenty-one and twenty-three. Ain't that awful?"

"Uh huh."

"And Junior, he's just as hard headed as his daddy. When he decided to marry that Lucy Barnes, I warned him. You know how them Barneses are."

"Not really."

"They're trash. I told Junior she'd run off just like his mama done, but he didn't listen to me."

"So she left him?" Leah asked.

"Well no...not yet, but mark my words, she will, and then Junior is going to come crying to me, and I'll say, 'I told you so,' not that it'll give me any satisfaction, but,"

"Do angels sleep in chicken coops?" Breanna asked.

"No," Leah said.

"But they have wings."

"Maybe they sleep on their stomachs."

Breanna squinted her eyes and scrunched up her forehead.

"I think we better Google that one," she said.

"Anyway...." Aunt Gertrude's voice boomed out and rattled the window panes. "Felicia never listened to me neither. I told her she ought to marry Vance Suit. They went together all through high school. Ever generation of his family made lawyers, and everyone knowed he would too, but she let him get away."

Leah asked, "I imagine he's a lawyer now?"

"Oh, yeah, graduated Duke and went in practice with his daddy, of course; I hear they have to take him over to the alcohol rehabilitation center in Asheville now and then, but everybody's got their little faults. The thing is, Felicia could've been setting pretty with him up there at one of them country clubs in Highlands if she'd just listened to me."

Breanna squirmed on Leah's lap and scanned the room. She pointed at the lit portrait on black velvet of Jesus gazing heavenward that hung over the mantle and asked, "Is that Jesus or Elvis?"

Aunt Gertrude said, "Good Lord, child, it's Jesus. Ain't you ever been to Sunday school?"

"Why is he making that funny face?"

"He ain't making a funny face; he's listening to His Heavenly Father."

"Oh," Breanna said, "Mommy makes that face when Daddy says something silly, too."

Aunt Gertrude's mouth hung open, and she stared at Breanna like she had just discovered a cockroach in her oatmeal.

Leah said, "I'm sorry, Aunt Gertrude; she's a bit precocious."

She hadn't liked that remark about Sunday school but decided to let it drop.

"Ain't she," Aunt Gertrude said. "Now where was I? Oh, yeah, instead of marrying Vance Suit, she married that Stanley Phillips she met at Southwestern Community College. What a dreamer; he fixed computers out in his garage. I told him them computers are just a fad, and he ought to apply at Walmart cause they sure ain't going out of business."

Leah rubbed her temples and said, "Do they still live here?"

"No, they're down in Atlanta. Buster brags about how they're making big money, but mark my words, they'll go broke when folks get tired of them computers, and then Felicia will come crying to me, and I'll say, 'I told you so,' not that it'll give me any satisfaction. What is it your husband does, Leah?"

"He's a...computer programmer."

"Well," Aunt Gertrude said, "ain't that nice. Maybe he could put an application in at Walmart just in case."

By now Breanna had reached the limits of her three-and-a-half-year-old patience.

"I want to see the horses," she said.

"What on earth are you talking about, child?" Aunt Gertrude asked.

Leah flashed on what she was talking about immediately. She widened her eyes, shook her head, and tried to catch Breanna's attention, but the child was oblivious to those adult social signals and dropped the bomb.

"Mommy told Daddy you beat dead horses; she said that's all you do. When are you going to beat one, Aunt Gertrude?"

The refrigerator hummed in the silence that followed, and Jesus rolled his eyes heavenward from his portrait above the mantle.

Twenty minutes later Breanna and Leah cruised through Cowee Gap and plunged down the Jackson County side of the mountain, headed back to Asheville.

"Was I bad at Aunt Gertrude's?" Breanna asked.

"No, honey. Not really."

"Are we going back to see Aunt Gertrude sometime?"

"No," Leah said, "I'm afraid not."

But she smiled when she said it.

Dan Lohwasser

The Old Bicycle

Deanna Klingel

I live on a narrow, winding mountain road that has no paint lines down the center. The rhododendron drapes over the road in the summer before the road becomes a single track in the fall and winter. Only three homes can be seen from the road. There are no curbs, hence no curbside trash pickup. My street is behind a security gate, so if a strange car should pass, we usually notice. The road is a dead end. It's quiet where I live; excitement is appreciated for its absence.

Years ago, during the outdoorsy-gardening phase of my life, I gardened the entire steep, wooded two acres of our lot. The nearby resort used to bring a van full of tourists every week to visit my gardens and learn to identify the native flora before heading to the hiking trails. It was during this phase that I developed a hobby called "garden art." This is the fanciful collecting of flea market kitsch planted in the garden to create some kind of symbiotic theme. Thus, no one was terribly surprised when I hauled an ancient Schwinn bicycle into the garden to plant under the sassafras tree near the driveway to welcome guests who smiled, pointed, and reminisced over the bike.

The bicycle used to be blue before it changed to rust. I thought the chrome fenders, patchy with rusted acne, blue rubber-handle grips, and a tattered seat added an artistic history to the old bicycle. I added a little basket on the handle bars and used a bungee cord to hold a bigger basketful of annuals onto the rear fender. I decorated it for the Fourth of July. The changing seasons were greeted by a leprechaun, an Easter bunny, and a snowman who rode on the seat held on with a matching bungee cord. Daffodils bloomed between the spokes, and a Junco set up housekeeping in the little basket. Home, sweet home. Visitors loved the gardens, and they loved that old bicycle.

Today my gardens don't resemble any of their former glory. Most of the paths are overgrown, and the art has all rotted and gone; there are no visitors. But the stalwart bicycle has sat on its flat tires for thirteen years with a charming look of permanence.

Now someone has stolen the bicycle. It's gone! Who could have taken it? My friend who picks me up for book club said that it was missing last month when she picked me up, but I didn't notice it until this month. I really do miss it. How could I not have noticed it was gone?

Is the old bicycle like so many other things that we really care about and love having around us, things that we get so used to seeing nestled comfortably among the weeds and flowers of our lives that we somehow stop noticing that they're there? We think that they will always be there with us. Then, suddenly, one day we notice that they're gone, leaving a hole in our garden to be filled in with questions. When did they leave? Where did she go? Why didn't he stay? Who took the old bicycle?

Nancy Minard

Jessica Waldron

Hamburger

Margaret Marr

I thought of you
while stirring
hamburger meat
the sizzle of memories
audible in my mind

Sadness welled from
a place of mystery
and overwhelmed my
dejected heart

I took a step back
from ground cow
lest my tears
mingled with supper tonight

Misty Lackey

Maev's Door

Gary Carden

October 14, 1936

Papa's mad again. I can hear him smashing things as I write this. I just blew out the lamp, and I'm writing by moonlight now.

It's been a month since Momma died, and I have gone to her grave every day. It takes awhile with my leg, but I have learned to take my time, always putting my left foot down firmly and then bringing my right one up by it, the way "Little Doc" Nickols told me. When I got to the graveyard this morning, the leaves were falling, and when I looked around, Larkin's Cove was floating in an orange, red, and brown ocean that shifts in the wind. Sometimes there are these little whirlwinds that will snatch the leaves up and carry them into the sky and let them fall again. That seems wonderful to me, to fall over and over, drifting down with other leaves.

My momma would laugh about me thinking that. "Oh, Maev," she'd say, "You're a fey child 'n no doubt about it!"

So, when I get to the graveyard, it looks like one great big quilt with patches of bright leaves. It's like Larkin's Cove is getting snug for the winter.

Granny Lynn told me that the dead visit each other at night. "Now, I don't mean they climb out of the grave," she said. "They stay right where they are, but they talk back and forth, gossip a bit, and sing songs."

Papa gets mad when Granny Lynn says things like that. "Hush that foolishness, Momma," he says. "It ain't right to a lie to children."

After he stomps out of the house, Granny Lynn just goes on like Papa hadn't said a thing. "Can't you just imagine it," she says. "Your Aunt Becca who died of scarlet fever, she's buried close to your momma. She sung soprano in the choir out at Mount Gilead. I can still hear her singing 'Sweet Afton.' She probably sings that for Diedre."

Granny hums a bit and sings, "Flow gently, sweet Afton."

"Have you ever heard Aunt Brecca sing?"

"No, child, that takes a special kind of hearing."

"But you are special, Granny Lynn. Everybody says so. Uncle Frode, he says you have second sight. I don't know what that is, but it must be something wonderful."

Granny Lynn laughs. "No, Maev, I'm afraid it isn't always wonderful."

Papa just came into my room. I heard him on the stairs, so I stopped writing and put the pencil and notebook under the covers and closed my eyes. He stood at the foot of my bed for a long time. I could smell him. Sweat and pop-skull. When he crossed to the window and stared out, I sneaked a peep, and I seen that he was crying. Poor Papa. He shook his head and wiped his eyes. Even though it was a whisper, I heard it. "Diedre," he said. For a minute there was moonlight on his face, and then he was gone.

I was just writing about going to the graveyard yesterday. There were still a lot of flowers and a big wreath from the Mount Gilead church that said, "Eternal Rest." Papa's little grave marker had fallen over, so I picked it up. "Diedre Lynn," it said. "Gone Home." In a little while, I felt that somebody was standing behind me. I knew who it was.

"Talking to your mother, are ye?" said Granny Lynn.

I didn't know what to say to that. Finally, I shook my head.

"Well, if you're not, maybe you should." Then, she squatted down by me and put her hand on the back of my head. "Go on, honey, talk to her."

"Out loud?"

"Well, sure. I'd like to know how you feel myself. That way, you won't have to tell it twice."

So I did.

"Momma, things are in a awful mess." I said. "Daddy's done some terrible things. He flailed his guitar to pieces. It was that twelve-string Gibson. I come home from school, and there it was in the front yard, all broke open and the strings snarled up. I picked it up and took it to the attic. I used to think that guitar was alive, especially when Daddy played it. I reckon I thought in some way it breathed and maybe had a heart, but if it did, Daddy killed it yesterday."

I cried then, and Granny Lynn said, "Go on, honey. Tell it all."

"I don't know what to do, Momma. Daddy leaves every morning, and I don't know where he goes. Darla May Turpin told me that he went to Dark Corners where the bootleggers are. Said that she seen him sitting on the Larka bridge with them men that drink wood alcohol. He comes in late, and he is always mad. One night last week, I heard him crying, and when I sneaked down the steps, I found him all bloody from hitting his head against the wall. He'd heard me coming, I guess, and he hid in the clothes closet. 'Don't look at me,' he kept saying. 'Go back to bed.' I did, but later I heard him breaking all the canning jars in the spring house. When I got up this morning, the door was open and he was gone."

We was quiet for a bit, and then I added, "Granny Lynn washes my clothes and feeds me."

"You bet," Granny said, and we sorta rocked back and forth for a while.

I quit talking then. Laid by Momma's grave and let the leaves blow around me. Granny Lynn stayed by me with her hand on my head and hummed one of her old songs.

"Do you think she heard me?"

"Yes, Maev, she heard you. Now you come home with me for supper."

We did that. It was a nice walk, even with me swinging this bad leg. Up Big Ridge past Indian Skull to Granny Lynn's house. Granny Lynn's old dog, Toot, met us at Indian Skull and walked back with his big old tail tick-tocking like the pendulum in Granny's clock. We had leather britches, cornbread, and tomatoes for supper.

October 21, 1936

This is about Toot.

Granny Lynn don't know how old Toot is. When I ask, she just says, "He's real old." He goes everywhere with her, except when she leaves Big Ridge or goes to church. Toot used to go to church, but he don't no more. He is some kind of mix, like maybe Blue Tick and Redbone, and has big floppy ears and no teeth. Not having teeth gives him a big, goofy grin.

I asked Granny once, "What does Toot eat?"

"Well, he can handle cream corn, soft biscuits, pumpkin pies, and stack-cake."

"Don't he eat meat?"

"Not anymore," said Granny, scratching behind Toot's big ears. "Sometimes he eats June bugs."

Toot got his name because he is musical.

"He can sound like a church organ or a bugle," said Granny. "Ain't that right, Toot?"

Toot knows when you are talking about him, and that big tail starts whopping the floor, and then he gives you a musical note. Tooooooooooooooooot!

"Sounded like a high C," said Granny. "Good tone, too. Sorta mellow."

Toot grinned.

Toot only played at church once. Preacher Grindstaff asked Granny to leave Toot home after that, and she did. Granny said that people still talk about Toot's performance though. It was an Easter program, and people had come from the big church in town with lots of fancy musical instruments. They would sing in Latin and then these big fancy horns would play. When they stopped, pausing before they sang in Latin again, Toot would play. Tooooooooot! It was sort of like punctuation. Sort of like a period. Granny said it caused quite a stir. Toot was under her pew, and nobody knew he was there—not even Granny.

"Well, as they say down in Georgia," said Granny, "'that dog's too old to hunt.' I guess he needed a hobby, something to replace coons and girl dogs. So, he took up music. I think that is just fine."

Granny loves animals, and they seem to know it. There are big, old, fat, sleepy cats all over the place. Now that Toot has lost interest in animals, they have took to showing up in the yard. Rabbits and ground hogs. Granny found a hurt deer once behind the barn and took it in. It is like creatures know they can come to Big Ridge. There used to be a raven with a broke wing that come right up on the porch. Granny fed it bread crumbs and huckleberries 'til it could fly again. I've seen her put splints on dogs with crippled legs, and when they mended, she would take them home...or try to. Uncle Frode says it is "damned unnatural."

Animals seem to know her. That deer, now, it comes to her back porch. Seen it myself. I ain't no different from them animals, I guess. I need Granny Lynn to feed me and tell me stories. Yesterday, when she said that I should come and live with her, I didn't have to think about it. I just picked up my Blue Horse notebook that has my name on the front and my box of colored pencils and walked up Big Ridge. Halfway there, Toot met me, and we walked on up the hill together.

Hayley Brooks

Where Rust Never Sleeps

Dwayne Lackey

Pretty grass is sown
in the places they once
were those days are over
and gone only memories
are left to stir.

My dad always said he would
fix them those old cars
that sat in the field
but the years rolled by
like clockwork and many
more began to build.

From the bottom to the top
of the little field out back
they came in many colors
of red, blue, and black
but nothing is meant to
last time will play for keeps
those days are lost
forever where rust never sleeps.

I guess they were just his hobby
something to do
something to dream
but sometimes the truest
intentions often run out of steam.
His heart was true he meant it
but age builds up in heaps
and the intention is lost forever
where rust never sleeps.

Keshia Stamey

Wesley Pope

All Is Quiet

Margaret Marr

An older-model Mustang careens around the corner and slides to a brake-squealing stop next to a curb where several people mill around on a boring Sunday night.

The man inside reaches across the passenger's seat, opens the door, glances out, finds for whom he's searching, and says, "Lace. Get in." He shoves a toothpick from one corner of his mouth to the other.

With a smile and a giddy thrill in her stomach, Lace slides into the car. "Hey, Thunder."

Peeling the top layer of rubber off his back wheels, Thunder pulls away from the curb and speeds down the street.

"Where's Brisco?" he asks.

Lace looks out the back window. "I think you left him with the Nashville Gang. He was standing right next to me."

"Oh." With a stomach-churning spin, Thunder turns around and heads back to the curb. He screeches the Mustang to a stop, rolls down the window, and locates his second man. "Brisco. Get in."

Brisco crawls into the back seat with a big grin on his face. "Hey, Lace." He tosses her a rose and eyes Thunder with suspicion. "Oh, boy, him again? What are we up to tonight?"

Without answering, Thunder stares straight ahead as he changes gears. A moment later, he says, "Rachel?"

Lace bites her lip. "Umm...not sure she'll be in tonight. That whole thing with the guy who reinvented himself for this world cut her deeply."

"We need her for this job." Thunder scowls through the windshield, his face a mask of seriousness.

Lace glances at Brisco; he shrugs and says, "I have no idea who you're talking about. I haven't met Rachel yet."

Lace returns her attention to Thunder. "Try the Broken Hearts Room."

With another spectacular entrance, Thunder stops the Mustang just short of bouncing a couple of little old ladies off the dark-maroon hood. After a quick scan of the patrons, we locate Rachel and urge her to join us.

Thunder demands it.

"I really don't feel like it," Rachel says and backs away. "No one is who they pretend to be in this place."

Brisco snorts. "Did you really expect anything different in here? Only Lace knows my real name." He glances at Thunder. "And nobody knows who the hell he is."

"Come on, it'll be fun. Forget about your broken heart for a while." Lace grabs Rachel's wrist and tugs. "Not everyone here is fake and dishonest." She glances at Thunder. "Well, maybe except for him."

Thunder glares at Lace, bites down on his toothpick, snapping it in half, and says, "Rachel. Get in."

With an eye roll and an exaggerated sigh, she slips into the backseat with Brisco. He produces a rose and extends it her way.

With a faint smile, she accepts it. "My, aren't you the charming one." She tosses the rose out the window.

"Hey! That was meant as a friendly hello." Brisco slouches down in the seat, his feelings slightly bruised.

"Tonight, we go after a gang of drug dealers," Thunder informs us with that same mask of danger glued to his face.

"Phhhhhtttt...how cliché is that?" Lace laughs, buckles her seatbelt, and settles in for a wild ride while Brisco and Rachel exchange private insults with a hefty dose of flirtatious bickering. She picks up an empty plastic Diet Coke bottle and whacks them on top of the head. "Cool it, you two."

A Pontiac Firebird pulls out in front of the Mustang, missing it by a hair. The driver shoots Thunder a bird, and yells, "Come and get us, you sons of beeches!"

With an eardrum-shattering yell, Thunder floors the gas pedal and chases the Firebird.

Startled, Brisco yells, "Hey, I think I left my brains on the glass behind me. Not to mention I now have a major case of whiplash." He massages the lump on the back of his head. "What's the freaking hurry?"

Lace nods toward the windshield and mouths, "Drug dealers."

"I want some doughnuts," Rachel says. "Dripping with lots of chocolate." She sniffs. "Preferably before I kill someone."

"Oooh, that sounds good!" Lace squeezes Thunder's bicep. "We need doughnuts."

"No doughnuts."

Brisco leans over the front seat. "Aw, come on, can't we have some doughnuts?"

Rachel suddenly shouts, "Krispy Kreme at ten o'clock."

Thunder shows no indication of slowing down.

Rachel kicks the back of Thunder's seat. "Stop, you Neanderthal. I demand doughnuts! Now!"

With a disgusted sigh, Thunder whips into the parking lot and heads for the drive-thru. "Make it quick."

Rachel places the order and reaches for the bag just as the Firebird honks and revs its engine across the street.

"What's the matter? You chicken?" the driver yells.

Thunder floors the gas pedal again and speeds head on toward the other vehicle, aiming for a T-bone hit.

Rachel yells, "Wait! We don't have our doughnuts."

"Hey! Rachel's about to fall out the window," Lace screams.

Brisco grabs her by the seat of her jeans and hauls her to safety.

She flops down and holds the bag up triumphantly. "Got 'em." She takes a chocolate-covered one and hands the bag to Brisco.

"Brisco. Guns. Now."

"Can't I eat my doughnut first?"

"No."

With a sigh, Brisco scoots over close to Rachel, gets on his knees, and lets down half the backseat. He pulls out a Ruger P90 pistol, hands it to Lace; reaches back, pulls out a Remington Single-Shot 12 gauge shotgun, hands it to Rachel, and then takes a SIG Sauer P220 for himself.

After several sharp turns and puke-inducing skids, Thunder thrusts his hand toward Brisco and gives an impatient gesture. "Where's mine?"

"Oh, sorry." Brisco rummages around in the bag and hands Thunder a glazed doughnut.

Thunder shakes the offending pastry off his hand and wipes the sticky residue on Brisco's hair. "Gun. Now."

"Ice it down, dude!" Brisco scrambles for another gun and slaps a Beretta .357 Magnum onto Thunder's palm. "Doesn't anyone wonder where I'm getting all this firepower?"

Thunder leans out the window, fires off a few rounds, and then shoves Lace down just as the windshield explodes with return fire, spraying glass across the car and into the backseat.

Rachel sticks her head out the window and screams, "Die, you slimy dogs, die!" as the shotgun booms in her hands. She pulls her head back inside and yells, "Damn it, Brisco, I need something with more oomph."

Brisco hauls out a Ruger mini semi-automatic rifle and hands it to her. "Have at it."

"They almost blew a hole the size of Australia through your face, Darlin'." Thunder yells over the noise of Rachel's out-of-control shooting and insults. He pulls his hand off the top of Lace's head so that she can sit up.

Darlin'? Lace straightens and shakes small shards of glass from her hair. "Yeah, well, you've got glass sticking out of your face."

She starts to pluck one piece from his chin, but Thunder smacks her hand away. "No time. Brisco, do something besides stuff your face with doughnuts." He tosses Brisco a look every bit as dark and scary as his name.

Brisco grumbles, reaches behind the seat again, and pulls out a grenade launcher. "Time to end this." He aims it at the Firebird and lets it fly.

The enemy's car explodes, shooting a fireball high into the night sky and sending a wave of super-heated air, along with a car door, toward the Mustang.

"Duck!" Thunder yells, and they hit the floorboards.

The car door bounces off the top, skims the backend, and lands in the street behind them. After a moment, everyone slowly peeks above the dashboard.

"Must've had a full tank of gas," Brisco mutters and snatches the bag of doughnuts from Rachel as she hands it to Lace.

"Great job," Thunder says, staring straight ahead, chewing on a fresh toothpick. "Now get out."

Brisco, Rachel, and Lace grimace as they exit the Mustang.

"You gonna make us walk home?" Lace asks.

Thunder yanks the doughnuts from Brisco and pulls away even before the car doors shut.

"Do you think he's gonna pull that glass out of his face anytime soon?" Brisco asks with a grimace.

They stand around and watch the Firebird burn for a few minutes, and then Rachel says, "Anyone wanna come back to my place for a drink?"

Lace shakes her head. "Gotta get up early and get the kids off to school tomorrow morning."

"And I've got to be at the comic book store by 8 a.m." Brisco tosses the girls a rose each, bows, and blinks out.

Rachel turns to Lace and gives her a hug. "Thanks. I truly did have fun. Glad that Smoky and the Bandit wanna-be invited me."

"Good." Lace hesitates, and then adds, "You know this world isn't meant to be taken seriously."

"I know."

"Same chat room tomorrow night around tenish?"

"You got it." Rachel smiles and blinks out.

She's followed a few seconds later by Lace.

All is quiet on the cyber front once more.

KASEY CHAMBERS

Holding Fast

Davin Eldridge

Under pillows of excessive indulgence,
nobody can hear you scream.
A snubbed memory still recalls the times
when sons became Fathers, and took hold of their dreams.

Some things are now certainly defiled,
know that what One person can have—another cannot;
turning "People" into a nation of exiles.

How assuring it is to see my people smile.

A full belly and super-sized dream,
realized by the neon television screen.
Prefabricated ambition packaged in corporate synergy.
Where daughters become Mothers hoping—

their children will realize the dreams their Fathers had seen.

KURT MCENTIRE

Jason Daniels

Tabletalk (Conversationalists or Demons?)

Matthew Justice

"I'll never let any of you win."
Stated Rage, boldly.
He tossed the cards to each seat.

Deceit always had the best poker face.
She spoke eloquently,
Of the spoils; she had no worry.

"I'll never win a hand, anyway."
Spoke Melancholy.
She gently added her coins.

Insensitivity raised the wager,
At her exclamation.

Peevishness spoke,
But no one listened.

"Does any of it matter?"
Faithlessness mouthed.
His chips made no clamor in the pile.

They played their hands.

Apathy watched idly.

Fall in Big Cataloochee Valley 2010 / An Ecology

Thomas Rain Crowe

For a hundred and fifty years
only one road out of 'Big Catalooch,'
dug by hand. Built on buffalo trails
that crawl like a blacksnake on a rough-cut wall
up Half Acre Ridge to Cove Creek Gap.

In the valley the small elk herds graze
side by side with turkey and crows.
Sharing fields that Caldwells cleared
on the bottoms 'long Shanty Branch.
Along Cataloochee Creek, the old church
and schoolhouse stand alone like widowed ghosts
with open doors that answer the bugling
of the bison-sized males like Sunday's bells.

How many Caldwells, Messers and Woodys lived here
hidden between these two old hills?
And how many elk, deer, bear and beaver
once called this place home?
Now we drive by in large gas machines
looking for graves. Spoiling for a fight
and the crash of antlers from the rutting bulls.
Going where the history of humans
and the flora for ancient animals have forever been.
From what the hell these eyes have seen:
the subtle passing of the green.

SAMANTHA PATRICK

Something for the Poor

Joanna Dickson

I was seven and my sister Sarah was four when we decided to help the poor. It was Christmas season, and people were beginning to put blue and red candles in their windows. The dime stores were selling tinfoil icicles, fake snow, and shiny, colored balls. At school we made snowflakes out of white construction paper and taped them on the window panes, and in Sunday school, the lessons were about the three Wise Men and the Star of the East. During story hour, Mrs. Carter told us about some kind ladies helping needy families. The ladies represented the Baptist Church, she told us, and on Christmas Eve, they carried baskets of food and toys to the poor children who might wake up on Christmas morning and find their stockings empty.

Sarah wasn't in my department, being three years younger, so I remembered the story to tell her that night. We shared a bed, and every night before she went to sleep, I told her a bedtime story. I always made her scratch my back while I talked. That way, I could tell when she was drifting off to sleep. Her hand would go back and forth, slower and slower, and finally it would fall limply on the pillow, and she would begin to snore. She usually drifted off right in the middle of a story, and many nights I used the same story over and over before she remembered hearing it.

When I told her about the kind ladies helping the poor, she didn't catch on right away that I meant WE should help the poor, too. In fact, she went to sleep before I got around to suggesting it. The next night, I told her the story again and asked why can't we help the poor, too. Sarah said she guessed that we could, if I could think of some way. We didn't have any money to buy food and toys for them because we spent every penny we got on those little wax Coke bottles with green and red syrup inside. Besides, we really didn't know anyone who was poor, so we never had any one person in mind. We just talked about "the poor" and planned to do something for them.

We decided to keep our plans secret. Sarah and I'd had plenty of secrets before. She never told anybody anything. I've heard her talking to herself, though, when she played alone under our chinaberry tree, and to Duffy, her red, flannel rooster. Every morning when I left for school, Sarah said that she and Duffy would try to think of some ways we could help, but in the afternoons I found her on the back steps, shooting marbles on the hard, red ground with Victor, the boy who lived two doors down. It was windy that December, and her hands were cold and dirty. She always said that she was just waiting for me to come home.

At night, instead of telling stories, we talked about what we could do for the poor, but I couldn't think of anything until the last week before vacation started, when a new boy moved to our town from Sacramento, California. He had stiff, yellow hair and crusty elbows, and I didn't pay much attention to him until I happened to notice him coloring one day. We were doing a lot of seatwork that week. The drawings were on slick white paper, and we colored them with thick, waxy crayons. The new boy would bear down hard, scrape off the excess wax with his fingernail, and then run the underneath of his shirttail over the paper to smooth the color. His nails were long and square, and they scraped away the wax easily. The process was quite involved. It wore the crayons down faster and left rims of colored wax under his nails, but the picture looked almost like a painting. I thought it was a beautiful effect.

On the Friday afternoon that our Christmas vacation began, I put some of the leftover seatwork and a few crayons in my book satchel and ran all the way home. Sarah was sitting on the back steps with Victor, and I pulled her into the house without saying anything about the seatwork. Victor was very curious, and once he got inside the house, he might never leave.

I didn't open the satchel until we were in our room with the door shut. Sarah thought the pictures were pretty.

"I bid to color the Santa," she said.

"We'll have to save them for a while," I told her, "till we have time to work by ourselves."

So we put them back in my satchel, and I hid it on a shelf in my wardrobe. Sarah got her box of crayons and put it on the shelf, too. Most of her crayons were flat on the end, from the way she colored, and the paper around them was peeled back, but she had twenty-two different colors.

For the next few days, Sarah and I were busy making decorations for our own Christmas tree. It was a little holly tree that Daddy had chopped down in the woods behind our house. He had put it in one of his old paint buckets, and Mama had wrapped a piece of toweling around the bucket. We were making those little red and green chains to decorate it. Sarah lay on the linoleum as close to the oil heater as she could get, pounding the paper with her fist to make the paste stick. Mama had let us mix up some flour and water, and the paper was just soaking it up without sticking at first.

"Hey, Sarah," I said, "if we have any of these left over, we could give 'em to the poor."

"Yeah, we could," she replied, pounding away.

We didn't have many left over, but we put them in a shoebox in my wardrobe. The tree looked pretty when we draped our chains around its branches. Daddy said that holly trees were too dry for lights, but Mama gave us a package of silver icicles to hang on the leaves. Sarah stood on tiptoe to throw on her share of the icicles. She threw them one by one, drawing her arm back like she was pitching a ball.

One day the sun didn't come out, and Mama made some mint candy. Sarah poured in too much red coloring, and the candy turned out bright red instead of pale pink, the way Mama liked it. Sarah was about to cry, but Mama said it just looked pretty, like Christmas candy ought to, and Sarah stopped whining and helped us pull the candy and lay it out, like a long snake, on the marble slab on our back porch.

On Christmas Eve, we got out all the pictures we'd hidden. Sarah divided the pictures into two piles. I had added one of my writing tablets to my pile. It had rough paper, and I figured we could color each line a different color if we ran out of pictures. Sarah was already busy with her Santa.

"Watch how good I can stay inside the lines," she said.

I showed her the new method of coloring, and the wax scraping delighted her. She bit her nails, so she had to use part of the broken scissors to scrape with. Just as I started to write a Christmas message on the tablet paper, someone knocked on our door.

Our front door was all glass, and any kind of knocking sounds loud. Besides that, it rattles. I ran down the hall and opened the door. A tall lady in a green coat asked if my mother was home. Mama was still in the kitchen washing the supper dishes, but she dried her hands and came with me to the door. I had started back down the hall to finish my Christmas message when I heard the lady say she was from the First Baptist Church. Then I stepped over behind the old coat rack in the front hall and stood very still. The lady was talking to Mama.

"I have a basket of food on the porch, and we wondered if maybe you could use it. It's not anything fancy—just canned goods, a small turkey, and some fruit. Oh, and a few toys for your little girls. If you think you might use...."

"Yes," Mama said in a small voice. "Yes. We can. I appreciate it. Merry Christmas."

It was dark there in the hall, and I peeked out from behind the coat rack. Mama and the lady were pulling the basket in from the porch. It was heavy and made a scraping sound like there was some sand between it and the floor. Some apples were lying on top, and I saw something wrapped in red tissue paper that might have been a doll. I walked back to my room where Sarah was still coloring, stretched out on the floor on her stomach. She was humming "Jingle Bells" and kicking her legs back and forth behind her back.

She heard me come in and called, "Come on, you got two more pictures in your pile."

I sat down on my bed and watched the little bits of wax jump off the crayon as she bore heavily on the paper. Now I knew why my book satchel was only cardboard and why our tree had no lights, and I ached inside. It didn't seem like Christmas anymore.

"You color them," I told her. "My arm's tired."

LAUREN MEDFORD

Tick-Tock

Charlene Homolka

Hidden in the attic, covered with dust, forgotten, silent for fifty years—no one knew if you could speak. Your caretaker, claimed by death, abandoned you on the mantel. Clockmakers are rare in this digital day, but I found one to bring your voice back. Your whispered tick-tock and tenor chime ring out the hours and half hours. A collage of memories washes over me.

Tick—Perfume of an old farm house—aging wallpaper, kerosene lamps, wood smoke, Great Uncle Virgil's cigarettes, corn cobs burning in the cook stove, fried chicken.

Tock—Dining table big enough for fourteen. Tiny salt cellars by each plate for the celery Great Grandpa grows. Cousins at the kids' table. Four generations of women, pumping and heating water, washing, rinsing, drying. Peeling linoleum in the sitting room, frayed rug in the front parlor—careful, don't spill!

Tick—Virgil on the back porch, shucking sweet corn, at least two dozen ears. First white corn I'd ever seen. Virgil says it's called "Country Gentleman." Yumm! Uncle Verne and I see how many roastin' ears we can eat. He lets me win.

Tock—Great-Aunt Ruby says, "Just slip your hand under, child. The biddies won't bite." Warm brown egg, feathers stuck to it. Lay it in the basket gently, gently.

Tick—Ancient cardboard holding fragile music rolls. Great-Grandma shows me how to load the player piano. Feet on the pedals. Pump to make it play. Watch the keys move! Fast, then slow. Sousa marches, ragtime.

Tock—Quartette of girl cousins skipping after Grandpa, going to the cattle pond. He swings his cane, smacking the grass—chasing rattlesnakes away. No swimming. Might be water moccasins. Throw in a line, catch a bullhead. In the memory, the banks are steep. Were they?

Tick—Milking time. Virgil lets us try. Barn cats wait for milk. He squirts it into their mouths. Help wean the calves with a nursing bucket. Dip your fingers in the milk and let the calf suck—velvety smooth gums, raspy tongue. Separator room smells like a creamery. Wash your hands. Strain the milk through cheesecloth.

Tock—Unremitting prairie wind. Windmill creaks relentlessly, swinging to and fro. Fill the livestock tanks. Is there water in the cistern?

Tick—Ruby leads me down into the storm cellar. Cool. Musty. Safety from tornados. Jars line the walls—peaches, pickles, green beans, mincemeat. Metal milk cans in the coolness, waiting for buyers.

Tock—Stinky outhouse! Watch out for black widows! Don't get a splinter from the seat. Sears catalog for paper. Get out as fast as you can.

Tick—Squeak, squeak—he sat in his rocking chair by the wood stove, taciturn and imposing. Tall, broad-shouldered, no gray in his thick shock of hair—intimidating to a child. I scrape a knee, crying. He puts me on his lap. Squeak, squeak—no more tears. I touch his face. He kisses my fingers. Guess what? Grandpa loves me.

Tock—Fun-loving Virgil and Verne—making rhythms with spoons. Put them back-to-back with a finger between. Hit the tips. Clickety-clack. "You can do it, child."

Tick-tock—The sow has babies. Don't go near her. She could hurt you. Shell the field corn with your thumb. Squealing piglets race to eat it.

Bong—Quiet little Grandma—so much pain for so long. Old clock, you witnessed her courage. Never complained in her life. Saw no reason to now. Passed without a whimper.

Bong— Lost interest in Virgil's crops. No appetite for Ruby's cooking. Did Grandpa die of loneliness? Gone within the year.

Bong—Virgil and Ruby moved to town. Sold the livestock. Rented out the farm. Phone rang. Fire! Farmhouse gone. Time claimed the barn, corncrib, and coops. Tick-tock.

Ten years ago, only the windmill remained. This past spring I discovered that corporate farming has obliterated all signs that there was ever a homestead there. The graveled, mile road is now only a muddy lane. No matter. The clock and I remember. Bong.

CANDACE SUTTON

The Lonely Leaf

Karen Gilfillan

The last to cling
yellows into death
with the frost of fall
that chills its soul

A minuscule sprout
in the warming sun
of spring's blue skies
has lost its smile

Flutters down in a soft breeze
to shoots of green grass
laden with
crisp comrades

The Ship of Souls

Patricia McNelly

White sails unfurled from the mast and the hull of a golden queen

The most beautiful vessel, a purely treasured requiem

One only has to live a full and righteous life, to pay the penance toll

And the ship will come as death approaches, to carry the heavenly soul

Appearing through the transparent mist

Her bow, and stern, and spirit gist

Silently she fades away, steady toward her native home

Carrying loved ones we had loved, and ones we wished we had known

The water is still and quiet, sun rays glorious and high

Solemn hearts listen, for a softly whispered good-bye

The grievance can be heavy, the moment now is peace

Beautiful tears that streaming down, free an imprisoned dark release

Ancestors gone before us, now await her on the other sandy shore

They have all been waiting, to embrace her precious self once more

Knowing gives me comfort, one day to see her on the horizon sill

Until all living days are behind me, and I have new journeys to fulfill

GLEN LEHMAN

Wesley Pope

On the Corner of Delaware and Wyoming Avenue

Davin Eldridge

A thousand miles away from my hardships,
I walked strange streets.
Worn down sidewalks cracked by traffic,
Contain a different kind of earth beneath my feet.

The vehicles that rush in between are the same as they are anywhere else.

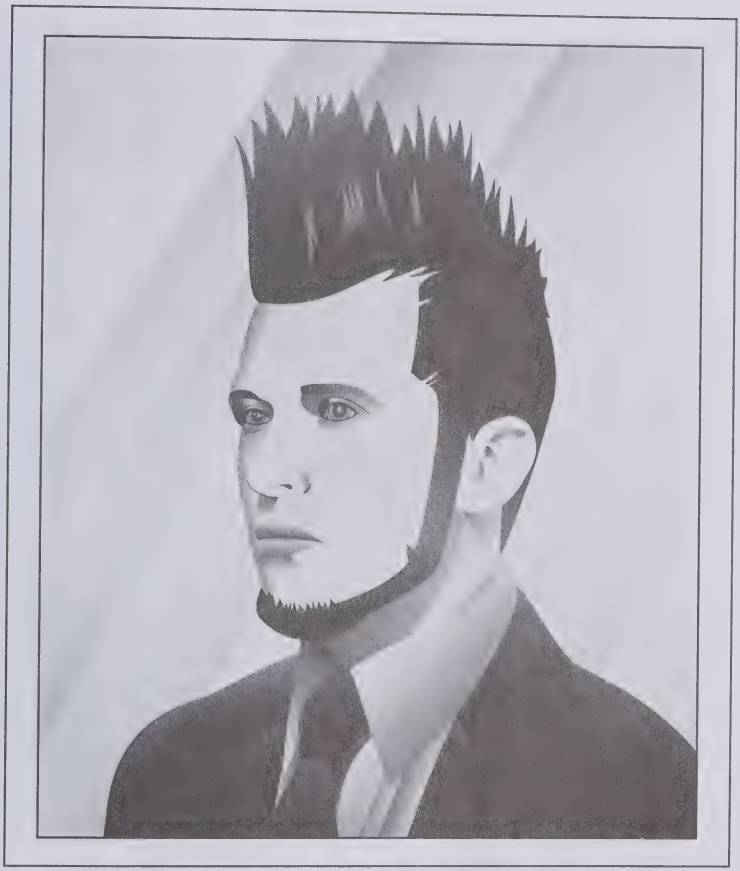
Drivers and passengers are just as lost as they are back home,
though they can easily make their way through this human zoo.
Everyone fears to die alone,
Contained underneath a sky so blue.

On the corner of Delaware and Wyoming Avenue,
I imagine Yankees feel pain the same as I do.

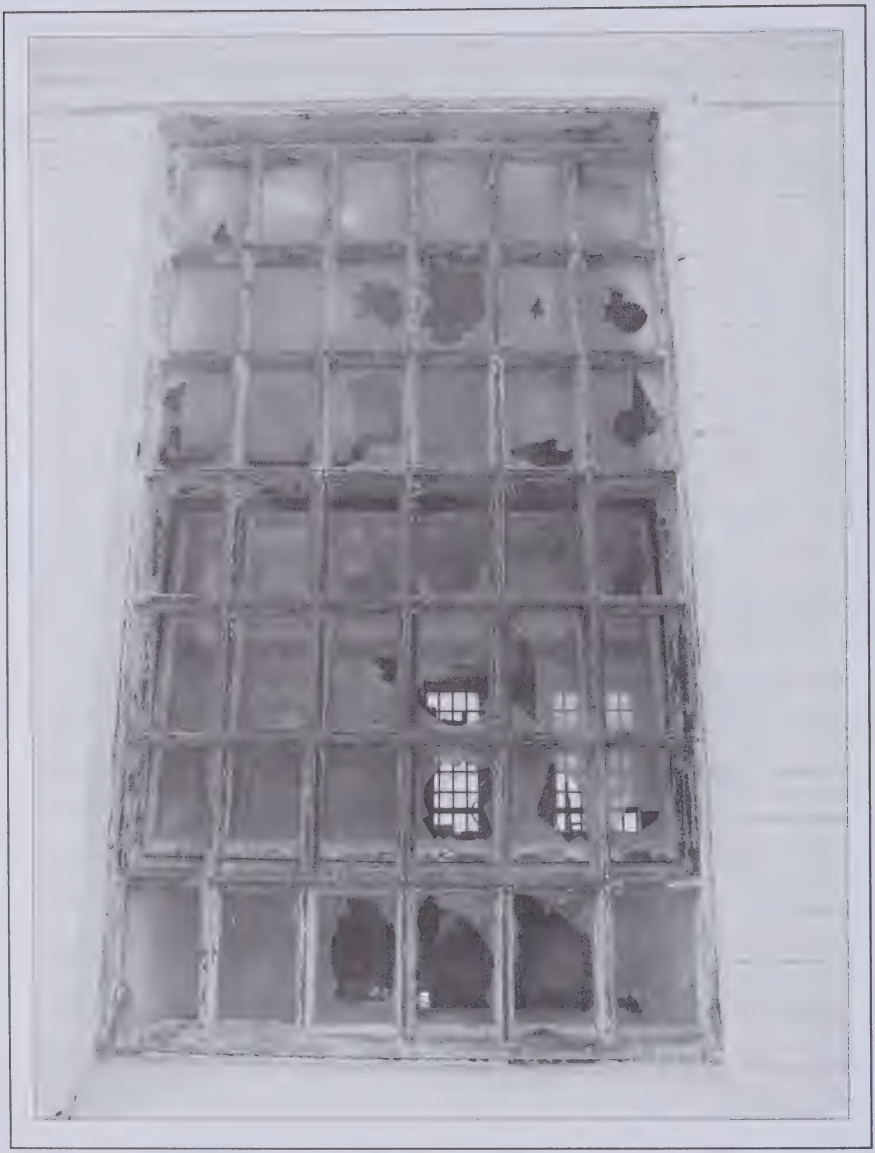
The Bum

DWAYNE LACKEY

He wakes up with
sleep still bugging him
calling out his name
under the shelter of
a concrete jungle.
The smell of thousands
of people all packed
in this sardine can
called a city this
attacks his nostrils
and burns his eyes.
He slips on three day
old remains of what
was once a hamburger.
Curses his existence
while showing the
world his middle finger.



PAUL SLAGLE



Misty Lackey

Musings on Silence

Joyce Foster

To me silence seems not a void,
a nothingness,
rather like a canvas upon which
color intrudes.
It is like the amnion that enfolds
our universe,
a palpable presence, the essence
of our heavens.
Can the bell peal without
the soundless intervals
as it sways to and fro?
Does not the musical score
depend upon the space
between the notes?
What follows as cannons cease
but the age-old quest
for the quiet of peace.
As the newborn is lifted
from one world to the next
is there not a blessed hush?
For me, silence flows through
the window of my soul
and ruffles the curtains
of my unconscious.
Silence has been for me
the most Holy of Holies
when a loved one slips
from the roaring agony of dying
into that sweet solace.

FRED EATON

The Last Silent Days

George Frizzell

We went out in the driveway
talking with the neighbors
at dusk
Later,
walking back to the house

with the glow of the light
on the mountain's silhouette
with the kinfolks' houses barely light

I heard a lone dog bark
and
bark
and
bark

and thought, "wish he'd shut up"

and
for a moment
he did

for a moment
the valley of my youth
a hushed moment

no traffic
before the crickets claimed their chorus
before the first firefly
before the cicadas—the chatteracks of the dark—

began their chants

before the traffic

I paused
a moment of longing for

the last silent days
of my youth

The Hummingbird Ball

Karen Martin

On a magical island beneath the willow trees,
Hummingbirds come from across the seas.
They fly as the warm winds begin to blow,
dressed in their finery, colors of the rainbow.
Flower kissers, gems in the sun,
they come to the ball to have some fun.
As the golden sunset gives way to the purple night,
hundreds of fireflies bring their glowing light
Crimson chandeliers decorate the ball
and butterflies serve Sweet nectar for all.
Hummingbirds sit on azalea chairs,
delighting in eating their petaled éclairs.
Mr. Mantis arrives on a great oak leaf boat,
and offers a ride to those who wish to float.
The Bullfrog Cricket Band, strike up a tune,
softly playing "By the Light of the Silvery Moon."
They swoop and dive with amazing displays of flight,
rubies and emeralds flashing in the moonlight.
The air fills with humming and a light buzz trill. As
they dance through the evening they are suddenly still.
For as dawn approaches they must take flight,
to meet once again on a starry summer night.

HAYLEY BROOKS

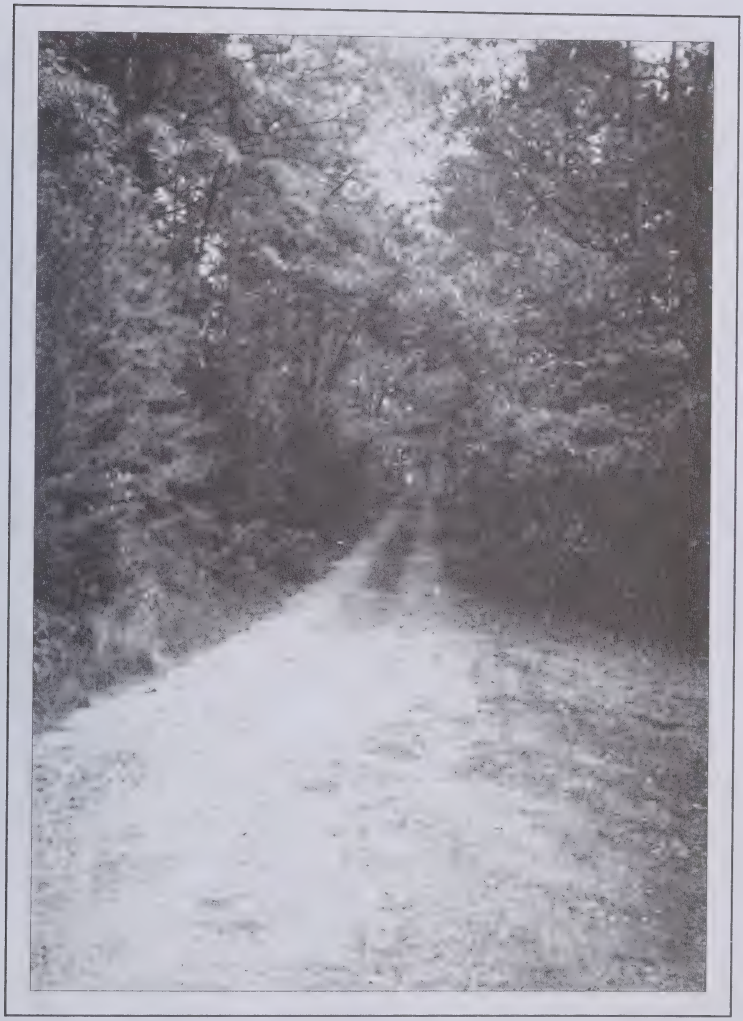
Snow in Heaven

Margaret Marr

It snowed in Heaven
tonight
I saw it through
the windshield
on my journey
home
Moonlight glowed on patches
of white
as if Earth were
turned upside
down
and everything but beauty
in all its forms was shaken
loose ...

NANCY MINARD

VITA NATIONS



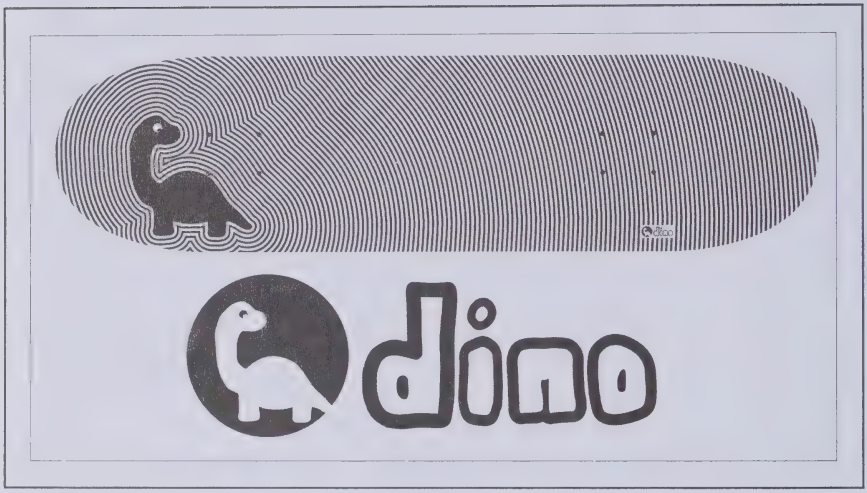
Amy Barker

Misty Lackey

After A Hurricane

Thomas Rain Crowe

For two days: rain
and high winds. People dead
at foot of Cullasaja Mountain in deep mud.
Huge walnut trees down
like dead soldiers
in the yard.
Behind the house, a stream has
opened a channel through the woods.
Washed our driveway into the flooded river
moving
swiftly
away.



KURT MCENTIRE

California Grands (kids)

Karen Gilfillan

Here comes ole Granny K
Yikes! Her hair is scary gray
Sez she can still dance
Yeah, right—maybe a soft shoe prance

Dad turned the music up real loud
Granny began strutting—righteous proud
She wiggled and giggled with a big smile
We danced in to dance for a little while

Come on, Granny, get on the trampoline
Nah, said her knees were too old and mean
Bet ya she did cartwheels
when she was a teen

She rode a horse—a real horse
So we've been told
Gotta giddy up fore we get
that friggin' old

On Turning 60

Betty Holt

At the grand ole age of 60
Here's what I have learned
You mess with fire long enough
You're likely to get burned
The one thing you can count on
Is everything will change
You don't need a cell phone
To be tapped as "out of range"
Friends will come and friends will go
The path will soon diverge
You may find new ones down the road
'Cause separate paths will merge
A lover who can be a friend
Has a chance to last
It's best to look ahead of you
Than mope about the past
There are some things in life
You surely will regret
But in that moment you did do
Your best—on this I'll bet
Because the majority does it
Doesn't mean you should
Blood is thicker than water
But it pays to knock on wood
The deeper you feel pain
The more you can feel joy
There's such a lot of difference
Between a girl and boy
There's not a single thing here
That's not been said before
But each one has to learn his truth
Or what is living for
So I'll leave you with some old clichés
Which may drive you to tears
And hope I'll learn a whole lot more
In the next 60 years!

Amberly Rogers

Jessica Waldron

Brought Back to Life

Jo Longbons

The best thing that has ever happened to me in my life so far has not been an animal, a woman, or even any of my own family. Six years ago a man named Jim Shope walked into my life, as if he were my guardian angel. I did not realize all the things he would do for me to change the life I was leading at that point; I had the notion that life was all about sex, drugs, and rock and roll.

It all started when I met his daughter and started to do meth with her. Soon after I met her, I got to meet her parents, Jim and Nancy. After a few visits, they loved me, saw me for who I was, and who I could be if I were just pushed into a goal-oriented lifestyle. At this point, they started to help me with things I needed, such as groceries or heat. I also soon realized how much they would mean to me in the near future.

Jim liked the fact that I was a hard worker, had small realistic goals, and was able to hold a job for long periods of time. I instantly liked Jim because of his way of telling people the truth. I noticed instantly how he always told people how it was going to be, how it is, and spoke his mind. He was truly the only person who believed in me and even saw something in me that I never saw in myself. I believed that I was a screw-up and always would be one. I thought life was all about making mistakes; my biggest mistake, at that time, was not learning from them.

Jim would always tell me, "Jo, you need to quit hanging out with those sh*theads and get your life on track." Also, in times of turmoil, he would say, "You are better than this, Jo; I know it!"

Then I got locked up for the first meth charge, but he would come see me and make sure I had money or whatever I needed. He would tell me toward the end of our visits, "When you get out of here, you are coming to stay with me until you get on your feet."

Three months later, I finally had my last court appearance and got a sentence of three years' probation, along with an immense $2,000 fine. I did great for the first six months, because Jim found me a job with a roofing company as he helped me start to get my life turned around and headed down the right road.

My next decision was the worst choice I could have made at the time, which was to hang out with his daughter's new boyfriend, who lured me back into the surreal, dark world of meth. It did not take long before I started to lose sight of what I needed to do to make my life better. The nightmare lasted for six months when I was jolted back to reality in the Clayton jail with my second meth charge. I sat in my cell for the first time

out of all the times I had been arrested and felt as if I had let someone whom I looked up to down. I felt it was because I never had someone like him in my life.

Jim did not come to visit me for the first month, but when he did, I sobbed like a baby who got to see his father for the first time in months. I told him I was so sorry I had let him down. He firmly told me something I will never forget which was, "Jo, you did not let me down; you let yourself down. I still believe you can turn out to be a great person, but this time it looks like you are going to do some hard time."

He was right. Five months later, I was sentenced to "seven-do-three"—and county time did not count—along with a $2,500 fine. "Seven-do-three" meant that I had a seven-year sentence but only had to serve three in the prison system and four years on probation.

A month later, I was sent to Baldwin State Prison where I sat for five months. I would not have made it through this abysmal time without the support of Jim. He never missed a week of sending me two letters and always made sure I had money to survive on—not much, but enough. I am sure this is because he did not want me to get comfortable contained by the prison system. In all the letters, he made sure to remind me to be strong; they all still cared about me, missed me, and, most important, he still believed in me. I felt as if I were the son he never had. When I got out after eleven months, he sent his daughter to get me. I was so glad to see her and hear that my experience had frightened her enough to also get off of the dope.

There I was fresh out of prison with the biggest life lesson a man could endure. Once again, Jim took me back into his house, just like I was part of the family. I now had a new attitude about how life is supposed to be led but still did not have any real goals. However, I stayed sober and still am until this very day. I will never go back to that sinister lifestyle. It took me about a year to save enough money to move out on my own. Once I was out on my own, Jim still continued to help me.

When things seemed as if they could not get any better, I made another mistake in the form of a DUI. I did no jail time but got three years' probation. Even though Jim was very upset with me, he still believed in me. He would say, "Jo, you have to quit putting yourself in tough spots. You keep getting ahead and then take steps back; you are smarter than that. Use your head and go back to school!" I did not take his advice until three years later.

I just kept working my same dead-end job for years until one of my bosses and I had a falling out. This put me in a rut which made me go back to a job that I had worked in Georgia until we ran out of work. I found myself unemployed after a month and a half. There I was broke and jobless with nowhere to go, so I asked Jim if I could move back

in. Without hesitation, I was more than welcomed back to Jim and Nancy's house. Yet, even though I had a roof over my head and food in my mouth, I now found myself falling into a profound depression. I felt like my life had no meaning to it, especially when my fiancée and I broke up.

One Sunday afternoon, after I'd spent the whole day alone, I started to drink some beer and made the biggest mistake that I have ever made in my entire life. After I had time to think about things for a while, I decided that my life was not worth living anymore. I grabbed two and a half bottles of Depakote 500 mg, which have one hundred pills in each bottle, and started swallowing them. I have no idea what time it was when Jim and Nancy found me sitting there, but it was just in time! Immediately, Jim rushed me to Angel Hospital. I do not remember what happened after I got there, but Jim says that I kept telling them that I was hot.

The nurses and doctors worked hard on me, and many people said that I was not going to make it. I am not sure when, but while at Angel, I had died for a minute and a half. They all were unsure if I was going to make it, so they sent me to Mission Hospital by ambulance. When I got there, the doctors and nurses were still unsure if I was going to pull through or not. After a day or so, they realized that I was going to make it.

A couple of days later, I woke up in Mission Hospital in Asheville, and who did I see? It was the man whom I have grown to love like a father, Jim. As soon as he knew I was okay, he went home. The next time I saw him, he gave me the "Jim" talk, which I do seriously love, because he puts the truth to it, without beating around the bush. This time the talk was more like a concerned talk. He told me, "Jo, you need to have something in your life to look forward to; you need to get yourself into school."

Two weeks later, I was scheduled for the college placement test that I took on the first day of school. As my scores were gone over, I found out what classes I needed to take. Before I signed up for classes, I called Jim, because I had to make a decision then and there.

I said, "Jim, if I want to start school, I have to sign up now since it is already the first day."

He said, with inspiration in his voice, "Sign up for classes."

The next day, we walked into Southwestern Community College. Jim bought my books and paid my tuition.

Without Jim, I would still be a lost soul or even dead. This is why I look up to this man like he is a hundred-foot statue. There should be a monument into which you could etch the names of people like Jim. He even told me about two weeks ago, "Jo, you got yourself here, not me. You took the big step and are working hard toward your goals." The only reply that I could make was, "I could have not done it without you!"

A Poem for Unpoetic People

Seth Kuehn

All unpoetic people fear not.

Poetry is easier than you thought.

All the groovy poetic tools

Are more like guidelines than actual rules

You

Can

Write

One

Word

Per

Line

And it doesn't even have to rhyme

You can write them out like an essay, friend,

And throw rhythm and meter to the wind.

In modern poetry, you are allowed

To make your words shaped like a cloud

You might be asking, "What's the use,

If poetic standards are so loose?"

I would say, "That's the point!"

Poems can be choppy.

And.

Disjoint.

There are also other cases

With words put in places

weird

Poetry can't be wrong; it's an easy pass

In your Creative Writing class

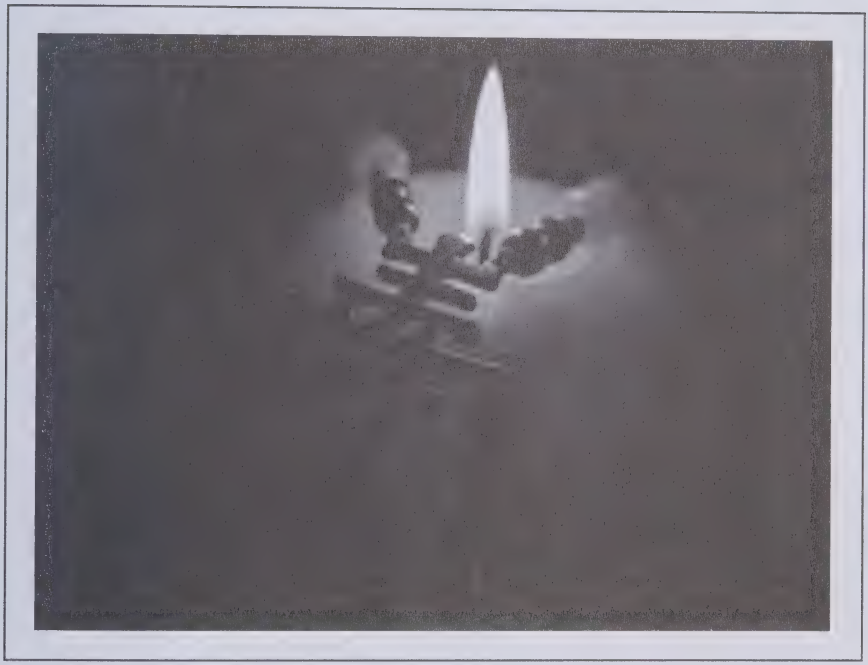
So when you write something not worth a fart,

Call it poetry. Call it art.

A Candle

Dave Waldrop

There's a candle in the window,
wax and wick and lively flame.
Its purpose is to write down
each and every soldier's name,
every young man and young woman
who has died in the Mideast war
and to keep alive the question—
What were they fighting for?
The President can tell their parents,
tell their sons and daughters, too,
"I'm so proud that they are willing
to give all for me and you.
I know I don't have to tell you
they were some of America's best.
Let's not lose sight of the fact
that they all died heroes' deaths."
Now let's take up a collection,
build one more memorial wall,
fire salutes and wave Old Glory,
set their tombstones straight and tall.
But, first we'll send a few more thousand
off to fight this Mideast war.
Candle, keep on asking—
What are we fighting for?



STEPHEN SANDERS

SAMANTHA PATRICK

The Tracker

Thomas Rain Crowe

The old mountain man William Rayfield's reputation as a tracker and a man-of-the-woods was unsurpassed in the environs of Herodsville. As Asher rode up the steep and narrow, old dirt road on the south side of Scaly Mountain in the horse-and-wagon he had borrowed from the Shakertown stables, he was thinking to himself that if there was anybody that could find Kitt for him, it was old man Rayfield. The old man, now in his early seventies, didn't spend much time anymore out in the woods or on the trail of his favorite wild animal, yet his knowledge of the woods and the world was still intact, and his mind was as sharp, now, as it had been on the day he was born. Asher had known old man Rayfield since he was a young boy and had kept up their relationship all throughout the years, considering him a teacher and someone of like mind and spirit. Asher cherished his time with "Cuss" Rayfield, as he was known to his more intimate friends, due to his penchant for using certain four-letter words in private conversation. He thought of cuss as a kind of surrogate father. But now he needed his old friend to be the legendary tracker and trapper that he had been in his prime, for what Asher was hunting was not some side of wild meat, but the love of his life. And as the minutes passed by that day, her trail was getting colder. As his horses pulled the wagon up the slope of the winding road on Scaly Mountain, Asher felt the urgency, and he slapped the rear of the big Belgians with his reins.

Old man Rayfield must have known they were coming. When Asher drove the horse-and-wagon rig into the dirt yard of the old mountain house where four generations of Rayfields had raised their families, the old man was standing on the porch cloaked in a pair of blue overalls and looking like a bird of prey perched on a branch of a tall sourwood tree, inspecting his surrounds.

"Well, what brung you all the way up ole Scaly so early in the day? I hear'd you jinglin' afore ye got pert near within gunshot. And by the looks of you and that there hitch you're in, I don't expect that you're just cooterin' around or that you come all the way up here for some of my bumblins," Cuss Rayfield shouted with a smile on his sagging, unshaved face, as Asher pulled up and parked the horses and wagon in the yard.

Asher jumped down from the wagon seat, kicking up a small cloud of dirt dust as he hit the ground. Old man Rayfield continued with his backwoods greeting, "You're a sight for sore eyes. I ain't seen you in a coon's age. Where you been keepin' yourself, Mr. Pope? Or is that Brother Pope? Hell, I hear'd that you go by 'Brother' now that you're shed of them Baptists and been hellin' around with them holy rollers up there in Shakertown.

Turned heathen on us, have you? Well, heathen or no, come in out of the yard and set a spell up here on the porch with me. H'its been so long a time since I've seen you that I jist want to look on your face awhile to memorize you again."

"Good to see you, too," Asher replied, sarcastically, as he tied the reins from the Belgians to the brake handle on the wooden wagon. "How you been? You're looking spritely enough. And I can see that you've already plowed a patch for your garden over there on the south side of the house."

"Come on up out of the yard, boy, and let's quit all this nonsense and blatherin' and get down to business. I know you ain't up here on no social call. What can I do fer ye?"

Asher climbed the wooden slats that were the ten steps that led up to the porch of Cuss Rayfield's mountain house and greeted his old friend with a warm handshake and a smile. The two men moved over and took their places in two old, hand-built, cane-bottomed rocking chairs that looked out over the valley beneath Scaly Mountain and in the direction of Herodsville which was one ridgeline over from where their eyes could see.

"Well, boy, lets get to it. I had it in my head to plow some more today, but since you showed up, I don't recon I'll have to now. I'm a little het up from all the plowing I done yesterday anyway. I ain't no spring chicken, you know."

"If there's anything I can do to give you a hand with any of that, just let me know, as I can still trail a team as good as anyone. Been doing a right smart of that sort of thing over in Shakertown lately, myself. But, you're right, I didn't come up here to gab, but to get some advice and maybe some help. I've kinda got myself in a fix, and I figured that you were the only one who could help me with this particular problem."

"What ye gotten yourself into now? You always was bad to find yourself on the wrong end of a hick'ry stick—ever since you was a young'un. So, what kind of devilment you been up to now?"

"Well, it's a long story, and I won't bore you with the whole thing. Besides, it sounds like you've already heard a good bit of it, from what you said as I rode up into the yard."

"Shore 'nough, young'un, word travels like wildfire up here in these hollers, and I heard tell that you took up with them Shakers on account of you were courtin' one of their women. A right purty one, too, I've been told. At least, you ain't lost your good taste, even if you have lost your good sense. So are you here on account of that girl?"

"Yes, sir, I'm afraid I am."

"Well, then, what kind of fix you gotten yourself into? I swear I don't understand what you'd want with one of them wimmin up there in that Shaker town, who I hear tell are all wropped up with lots of clothes and don't never take 'em off to spark, nohow."

"Like I said, it's a long story, and I won't bore you with the details of how this whole thing came about. Let's just say that I lost my head over one of the girls one afternoon when I was up there for their Sunday Meeting. But that's been a long time ago, now, and

since then we got to know each other, and that's what made me decide to move up there and become a Shaker—so I could be closer to her. Her name is Kitt, by the way."

"Kitt, like in a fox pup?"

"That's right. But I don't think she was named after the animal. I think Kitt is short for Katherine or something like that."

"Ok, so far all I've got of your yarn is a smidgin'. What else have you got to say fer yourself?"

"Well, Cuss, she's up and left. Over the weekend, she packed up and just disappeared. And no one seems to know where she's gone. Didn't leave any notion or indication of where she was headed, or anything. All I got was this letter, which was in the mail today when I went down to the post office in Shakertown." Asher reached into his coat pocket and removed the crumpled letter.

"Seems right quare, and there must be more to it than you're lettin' on. You ain't scared her off due to your chasin' after it, have you, boy? Boys your age can get mighty hard up for a little sugar now and again. I know, I was a young buck like yourself once, too. Let me see that letter, boy. Maybe I can scare up some meaning out of this letter that you ain't seen. I recon life's problems is a lot like trackin'. It's more about what you can't see than what's right under your nose. Let me see if she ain't left nary a trail in this here letter of yourn."

Asher handed Cuss the letter. Cuss unraveled it and read. For a few minutes, there was silence there on the porch of the old house. Asher could hear the sound of a hoot owl coming from the woods behind the house and the raps of a pileated woodpecker far off in the valley below. Finally, Cuss finished reading the letter and put it in his lap, looking out over the valley and the ridgelines of the Kentucky hills before finally speaking.

"Well, she really ain't said much in this here letter, I gotta say. At least, not much 'cept for a lot of gushing and howdy do. And she's holdin' to her story—such as it is. She makes a big hellaballoo out of how she don't want to hurt nor hinder nobody. But the tracker in me says that story ain't worth a hill o' beans. While she may be one good woman, and I know you think the world of her, I've never heard tell of anyone who was sech a saint and would run off from home when they ain't done nothing, yet, to run off from. You see what I'm gettin' at, here, boy? I think there's more to the story than what she's said. She may be gwine and only dust on the road, but she's left a mighty big part of her behind. At least that's what I've culled from this here letter."

"So, can you help me find her? Did she leave any clues in that letter that I just couldn't see?"

"Not tracks, if that's what you mean. She's leavin' a heap o' heart-tracks and mind-tracks, to be certain. But she's been pretty clever in not leavin' no footprints that a man could foller. The whole thing puts me of a mind of the time my second cousin Eula disap-

peared all them years ago—headed herself over the mountain to see some granny doctor a'cause she wuz in the family way. She didn't tell nobody where she was goin', neither, then came back about a week later as if nothin' had happened. You don't think maybe your gal has gone off to see some granny doctor or something, do ye?"

"I don't know, Cuss. It sounded like she wasn't just going away for a short time. It sounded in her letter like she was going away for good. And she was clear about not wanting me to try and find her. She's always been honest with me, which is one of the reasons why I love her. I have to believe that what she's saying there in her letter is the truth."

"Maybe so, but wimmins is awful clever when it comes to hidin' somethin' they don't want nobody to know. 'Specially when they get in a tizzy, or if they's avoiding a fray. Maybe your Kitt is like that fool's gold. Hit's yaller and shiny and mocks gold right smart, but you hit it a tap and 'stead o' flattening, it busts into pieces."

"I've got to find her, Cuss. My heart's a bustin'. And what am I gonna do stuck over there in Shakertown all alone?"

"Well, I'm afeared I can't help ye in terms of trackin' her down. Not unless she or the good Lord sends you some fraish signs—sich like in another letter or somethin'. I can see that you're a fool about this girl. I can see that much for damn sure. And you can take out in that wagon of yours and scour the land a-lookin' fer her, but it aint gonna do you no good more 'en likely. And it ain't gonna do you no good to sulk around or sull up like some ole stump-water while you a-waitin' for her to show up again. Hell, I ain't got no stummick for that sort of thing. They's too many trout in the river to be chewin' and swallerin' old bones. You catch my meanin', boy?"

"Yeah, Cuss, I know what you're saying, but that don't make this pain in my belly go away. How am I going to fix that?"

"Well, hell, maybe you're the one that needs you a granny doctor!" Cuss laughed as he said this, looked at Asher, and winked. "You got a sour stomach, maybe it's you that's in the family way! Either that or you've been eatin' green warnuts." Cuss smiled again at Asher. "Time'll fix it, boy. Never you worry yourself about that. You best be gettin' on about your life and whur you're gonna live and what you're gonna do. Are you gonna just end up no count, worry yourself to death, and end up like a tree that's been wind-thrown and busted to kindlin' and just wigglin' and winglin' around for the rest of your life, or are you gonna go by what I'm tellin' you, here, and stay vig'rous and be the pop-cracker I've always known and get on about your life?"

"If you really don't think I can find her and shouldn't be wastin' my time trying to track her down, then maybe you're right. But it's not going to be easy for me just to do nothing to try and get her back."

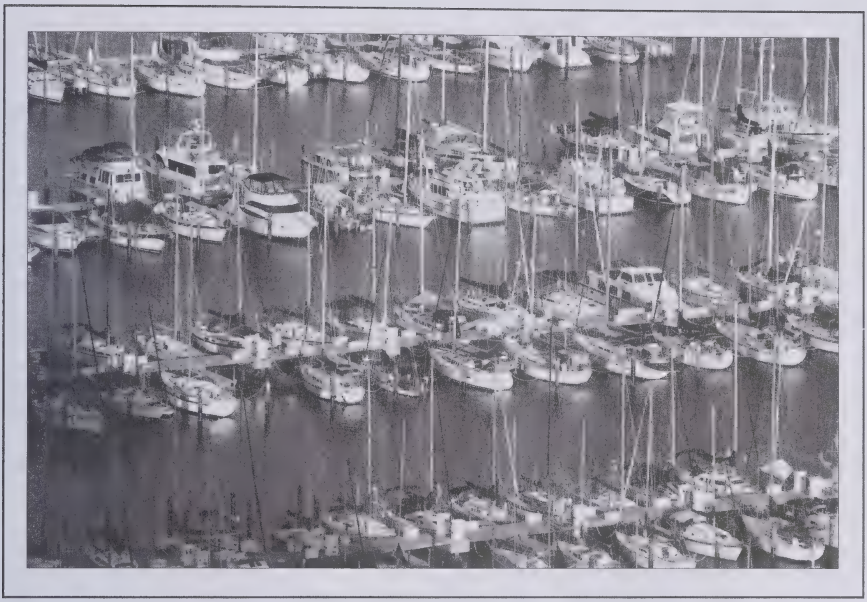
"I understand, Asher. Hellfire, I've been in your shoes before, so I'm not just speakin' out of the side of my mouth. When I was in such a fix as you, I'd go to them poke suppers and bid on them pokes of food that the wimmins had made, and I'd get to eat with the girl who fixed it and then carry her home. That way I got to sweet-heartin' again and plumb forgot that other'n who had cut out on me like I was pizen. So, I don't want to hear no tales of Brother Pope takin' no pizen on account of some play-pretty having left him for some polecat over in Tennessee. You hear? So, don't do like that boy in that book you was readin' a few years ago—that Romero, or whatever you called him—who pizened himself on account of his girlfriend who was only playing possum."

"Not to worry, Cuss, I'm going to be ok. Eventually. I'm not going to do something stupid."

"That's my boy. Well, it's time to sing 'Old Hundred' and for you to get back home—to Shakertown or wherever you're callin' home these days. And remember, you never know who you'll meet up with just around the next crook in the road. That next fox cub with blue eyes may be there waitin' on you just when you least expect it. So, stay in the saddle, boy, cause a man who's been horse-throwed and is afraid to ride ain't gonna get the chance to turn that curve and see what it is that's waiting there fer him. Now, git your hind end and god's biscuits outa that there chair and take that poke of creasy greens and miner's lettuce that I picked today with you and make a mess of them tonight for those friends of yours over in Nice Grove, as I bet they've never had anything like that. 'Sides it's good for the croup this time of year. You tell 'em that, too."

Asher thanked Cuss for his advice and the go-away bag of greens, climbed back into his wagon, turned his big Belgians around, and headed out of the front yard of the old mountain home-place and back down the narrow, dirt road off Scaly Mountain in the direction of Herodsville and Shakertown beyond. Cuss Rayfield sat in his ancient rocking chair, rocking back and forth, with a smile on his face, chewing on a piece of ginseng root he had taken out of the chest pocket of his overalls as he followed the dust of Asher's descent down the mountain. There was a look of knowing on the old man's face, and if you were to look closely, you could see a tear.

Jenny James



Candace Sutton

PAUL SLAGLE

The Kisses Incident

Margaret Marr

I have the most incredible ability to make myself sound and look like a total nitwit when confronted with a man. That might explain why I've never heard the words, "Would you like to have dinner with me on Friday night?"

Yes, I've been married, and I have two children from that union, but the father of said children never asked me out. I skipped school one day, and, bang, we became a couple. Come to think of it, he never proposed to me either. We walked into a jewelry store, bought rings, wore them out, and, faster than a hummingbird's wings, we were married. About a minute that lasted twelve years—yep, you guessed it—bang, we divorced.

Single and back on the market again, the male species' radar tuned into my airwaves. One afternoon a guy dropped by my office and casually asked me where my favorite watering hole was.

"Fontana Lake," I answered. When the silence coming from his direction began to howl, I looked up from the contract I was working on and repeated, "Fontana Lake. It's where I like to swim."

A confused and slightly amused smile crossed his face as if he couldn't quite figure out if I was serious or not. "No. Where do you like to go out for drinks?" he asked.

At that moment I would have given up a million-dollar, winning lottery ticket to be able to wiggle my nose like Samantha, poof into a sheet of Saran Wrap, and then toss myself on an open blaze so that I could shrink into nothing. Instead, I stumbled through a reply. "I...um...err...don't drink."

He left my office shaking his head with that same confused look, minus the smile. You can bet your seat tickets on the first leisure trip to the moon that I'll never hear any sentences from him that start with, "Would you like to...."

But the one that takes the cake, wins the Olympic Gold Medal as well as the Publishers Clearing House Sweepstakes, is the kisses incident.

The college once employed one heck of a good-looking EMT instructor. His smile alone could make a lady corpse jump for joy in the medical students' morgue—if, in fact, the college actually had one of those—and those dark eyes of his had 'em fainting in the halls. When he told me about the time he got caught naked while eating whipped cream from a can in a McDonald's restaurant, they had to scoop me up and toss me in the

morgue's freezer to solidify me into one piece again. (No, he didn't actually get caught anywhere naked, at least not anywhere he'd confess to me. He was joking.)

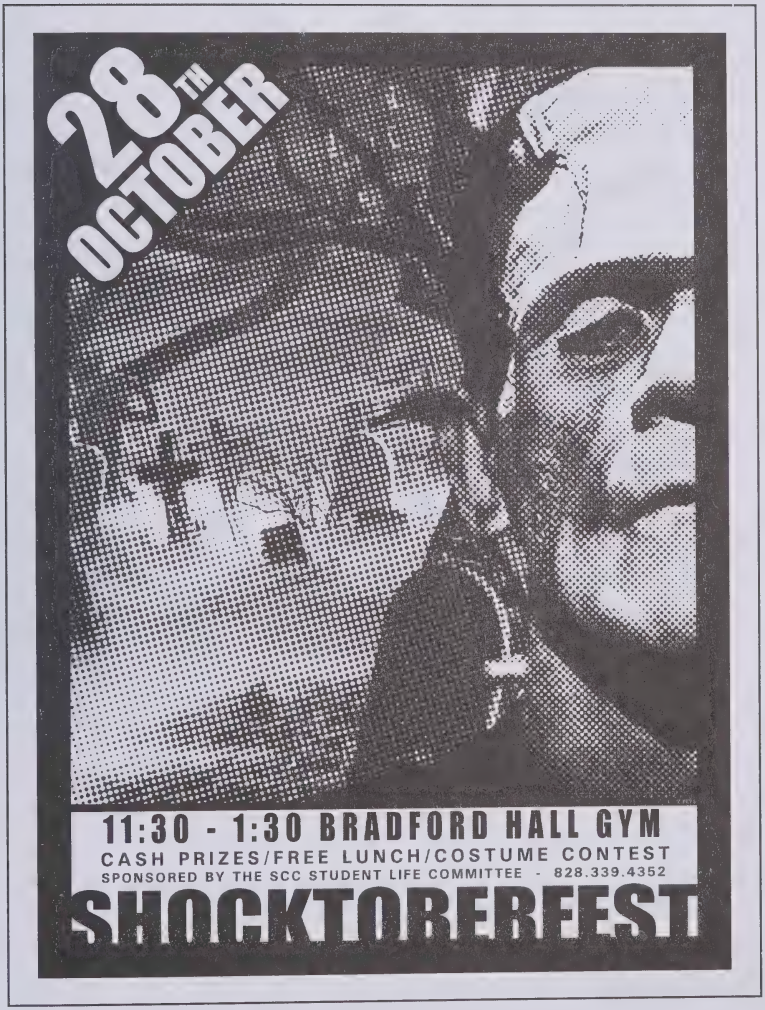
Although I now have a boyfriend (who has never officially asked me out either) with whom I'm very happy, I'll admit I still got a little flustered when the EMT instructor arrived, and I would end up knocking a canister of pencils off my desk or dumping my inbox, scattering paperwork all over the floor.

One evening, he walked in with a stack of paper and said, "I need fourteen copies of these, and I just have to steal a kiss from you."

My heart slammed to a stop against my breastbone. Heat rushed to my face, my ears started roaring, and I dang near fainted. I opened my mouth to speak, but my tongue lay there like a lump of cement, and a strangled grunt, coming from the back of my throat, was the best I could articulate.

Finally, I got brave enough to look up at him and was mortified to see him reaching toward the bowl of Hershey Kisses on my desk.

The air whooshed out of my lungs loud enough to startle him. "Oh! *Those* kisses. Yeah, have all those you want." Ugh, that right there explains a lifetime of solo Friday nights.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ZACH KEYS

KEVIN GEIGER

Sparkles of Light

Karen Gilfillan

A few years ago, I hung strings of multi-colored, little Christmas lights around the screened-in porch. I draped sparkles of fun all over the house, even the fake Ficus tree. The kids and grand babes would be here for the holidays. I wanted to see lots of smiles.

I also ran a strand zigzagging up and down the kitchen window. When I approach the kitchen on a cold winter morning, bunches of cheery colors greet me. Smile time. It's a great way to begin the day.

Last Fourth of July, grandson Maxaroonie looked up at me with big inquiring eyes. "Granny, why do you have Christmas lights out here and in your window?"

"I love seeing the sparkly lights. They make me smile."

Roonie grinned. "Me, too. But I thought they were just for Christmas."

"Not in Granny's house."

"Why?"

"I like to look at each and every day with a Christmas smile. The little sparkling lights remind me of happy times."

"Granny, I'm happy. The lights make me smile. But aren't you a little weird to leave Christmas lights hanging around all year long?"

"Who suggested that idea?"

"My mama."

"Oh, the one who is so busy raising her kids that she's forgotten how to be one."

"My mama was a kid?"

"Yep, and so was I."

"YOU were a kid—like me?"

"Uh, huh."

"Whoa! Are you sure you were a kid?"

"Still am, boy, still am. Gonna get older, but you don't have to grow up. Old people don't have Christmas lights every day of their life, but I do."

"Granny."

"Yeah."

"Cool."

"You got that right, dude."

We did a high five and then a low five as I said, "Let's go four-wheeling."

"Can I steer?"

"Yes, but keep your thumb off the go button."

"Why?"

"The last time, you power jerked us and threw your little sister over the back."

"Yeah, but she hung on. She looked like Superman flying behind Big Red."

"True, but your mama threw a hissy fit."

"What's a hissy fit?"

"It's a state of frenzy when a mother sees one of her children in a perilous situation."

"What's pear less?"

"That would be a mother observing a potentially dangerous situation."

"Mamas like to worry a lot."

"Yes, they do. Sometimes it's even worth their concern."

We're trucking down the driveway toward the house.

"Hey, Granny, I see the sparkle lights in the window."

We avoided a collision with the pickup truck by a good four inches.

"Roonie! Eyes on the road! Oh, crap, your mama's standing on the front porch with her hands on her hips."

"She doesn't look too happy."

"Boy, we almost crashed. Not a good scene for a mama to see."

"But we didn't crash, and I like the sparkly lights."

"You want to see some sparkles, check out your mama's eyes."

"Oh, boy, they're flashing. Aw, geez, why did she have to grow up? I like being a kid with you."

"I hear ya, but right now, we kids have to be real, real nice to your mama. Push the go button, Roonie. Maybe she'll cool down by the time we come back around...."

Glen Lehman

SHANNON CRONKRITE

Signal Lost

Steve Brady

Ashley didn't see the stop sign, the intersection, or the Peterson family crossing in front of her until she slammed into the side of their tiny Ford Focus with her massive Chevrolet Suburban. Then she felt the jolt and the whack of the airbag when it exploded in her face and heard the tearing metal and breaking glass. Before that moment, she had been in cell-phone land, where disembodied voices weave spells and render the here and now invisible. Upon impact, the cell phone flew out of her hand and through the window before disappearing under the wheels of the Focus as it spun sideways and shot past her door.

The night before the crash, Ashley came home from work and pressed her cell phone to her ear as she carried a grocery bag, bulging with microwave dinners and bags of chips, into the house.

"Who died and made her queen?" she asked her friend Beth from work. "Some people sure love to be in charge."

She swept past her daughter, Mandy, who sat in the living room watching television. The girl, who was thirteen, looked up and watched her mother disappear into the kitchen.

Ashley shoved the dinners into the freezer and tossed the bags of chips on the counter.

"I've been there longer than her; I should've had that job."

Mandy walked in.

"Is there anything to eat? You forgot my lunch money."

Ashley said, "Like I haven't been doing the billing for the past four years."

"Mom, I'm hungry."

Ashley glanced at Mandy and pointed at the bags of chips on the counter.

"You sure find out what a person's true colors are when they become your boss, don't you?"

"Mom."

"Well, isn't that the truth; that little witch...."

Mandy finally shrugged, selected a bag of corn chips, and left the room.

After Ashley finished talking to Beth, she went upstairs to her bedroom to change clothes. Mandy slipped in behind her.

"Mom, I sort of wondered if...."

"Didn't I teach you to knock before coming in this bedroom?"

"Oh, well, yeah, sorry, I just wondered if maybe you wanted to go to the mall or...."

Ashley picked up the cell phone and punched in her friend Christine's number.

"Hey Christine, did you hear about Lexy? Are you ready for this? She's seeing her boss."

"Mom."

"No, not him, the assistant manager, Darryl Henson.

"Mom."

"I know; he'll be bald by the time he's forty."

"Mom."

Ashley slapped her hand over the phone.

"Good grief, how many times do I have to tell you not to interrupt when I'm on the phone? What do you want?"

"Can I go over to Jenny's house? Her mom said I could come for supper."

"So go already." She waved Mandy away. "Sorry, Christine, what were you saying? Yeah, really desperate; she's almost thirty now."

Mandy stopped at the door and looked back at her mother before leaving.

"Yeah, if she has any sense, they won't have kids."

After Ashley finished changing clothes and talking to Christine, she sat down in the living room in front of the television and called her friend Paige. While they were talking, her husband, Jack, came home from work.

"Hey, what's for supper?" he asked.

"Just a minute." Ashley covered the phone with her hand. "Microwave dinners; help yourself."

Jack nodded and plodded off to the kitchen.

Ashley said, "It was just Jack; he wanted to know what was for supper, like I'm a waitress or something."

Jack microwaved a dinner and sat down at the kitchen table. The dinner smelled appetizing, but it didn't look substantial. There were about eight or ten forkfuls of linguine in the main partition and four or five forkfuls of broccoli in the smaller one. Ashley bought only low-cal choices because she was obsessed with her weight. He could hear her in the living room talking about that very subject.

"Yeah, I'll probably just have a Lean Cuisine tonight. I put on two pounds this month."

Still, it wouldn't hurt her to buy a dinner or two with enough food to fill up other people if she wasn't going to cook, especially since she didn't want him to cook either because he made fat stuff that ruined her diet.

The sun set and twilight settled in the kitchen, but he didn't bother to turn on the light. Instead, he threw the empty microwave container into the trash, poured a shot of bourbon, and sat down in the growing shadows. He'd begun thinking about Laurie too much. They shouldn't be flirting so much at work, but he couldn't seem to stop, and he wasn't sure he wanted to.

From the living room, Ashley said, "That's what ticks me off about guys; they strut around with their big pot guts and still think they're studs."

Jack drank two more shots before he walked into the living room and said, "I've got to go back to the office tonight—inventory, you know; guess I'll be back late."

Ashley glanced at him and nodded. Then she said into the phone, "Big deal, you look great. I wish I looked like you."

After Jack left, Ashley took a bath and talked to her friend Paula about the shortcomings of husbands and children. Then she ate and talked to her friend Savannah about celebrity gossip while they filtered bits and pieces from a reality show on their separate televisions.

When Mandy came home and passed her mother's bedroom door, Ashley still was talking on her cell phone.

"Have you tried that new tinted moisturizer?" she asked. "It's called Efferglow; it's a little expensive, but...."

Mandy slipped past to her room and crawled in bed. Jenny's mother was really nice. When she made supper, the girls had helped, and they had laughed and talked. Jenny's mother had asked them about school and teased them about boys. Afterwards, she took them to the mall, and they watched a "chick flick." It was so much fun being all together like that. If only Jenny's mother could be her mother. She was a bad person for wishing that, but if a wish was really like a prayer, there was no taking it back.

When Jack came home, it was a little past eleven thirty, and he turned on the television in the living room and stretched out on the couch. He knew that Ashley was already in bed upstairs, still talking on the cell phone if she was awake. If not, she already had turned off the light and gone to sleep with the cell phone beside her, plugged up and recharging. On the television, Jay Leno was doing his monologue, but Jack wasn't listening. He shouldn't have gone to Laurie's apartment. Now he wanted to be with her more than ever. They hadn't done anything but talk and have drinks, but it was intimate, and if adultery was really in the heart, there was no denying it.

Two ambulances arrived at the scene of the accident the next morning. The Peterson family suffered intensive injuries when their compact Focus was struck in the side, but Ashley emerged unscathed because she had been shielded by the airbag and the massive bulk of her SUV. A team of paramedics stabilized the husband, wife, and daughter on gurneys and lifted them into the first ambulance while a single paramedic walked Ashley to the second ambulance. He told her that they would have to follow protocol and transport her by ambulance to the ER but she would be released after a short exam.

Before they left, a young highway patrolman took Ashley's statement and issued a citation to her for the accident. He lectured her on the dangers of driving while talking on the cell phone, and she pretended to be sorry, but she thought that it was just one of those things that could have happened to anyone. Good grief, it wasn't like someone got killed or anything. Making a big deal out of it was probably the patrolman's job, but it would be better to wait until Jack had a few bourbons tonight before she told him. Maybe he wouldn't overreact then.

While the ambulance was in route to the ER, Ashley reached for her cell phone to let the office know she wouldn't be in today. What was she thinking? It was gone. Oh, well, she could call work from the ER and then call Savannah to pick her up and take her to buy a new one. She had wanted a newer model with upgraded features anyway.

After the wreckers towed the battered cars away from the intersection, all that was left were dull bits of plastic, wire, and silicone circuits lying in a field of broken glass particles that sparkled like ice crystals in the early morning sunlight.

Keshia Stamey

CANDACE SUTTON

Call for Submissions

Manuscripts for the 2013 edition of SCC *Milestone* will be accepted through December 1, 2012. In the event that funding is not secured for publication, submissions will be held and considered for the next issue.

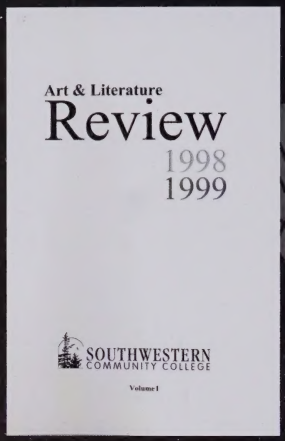
Each submission should include the author's name, address, and phone number on the first page. Essays, local history, poetry, and short stories—as well as black-and-white artwork—may be submitted. All submissions should be typed, and prose is limited to 2,000 words.

Seven persons whose manuscripts or works of art are selected for publication also will receive cash rewards:

- First and second prize in poetry
- First and second prize in prose
- First and second prize in artwork
- Cover

Students, faculty, staff, and alumni—along with residents of Macon, Swain, and Jackson counties and the Qualla Boundary—may submit to SCC *Milestone*.

For additional information, contact Southwestern Community College's Public Information Office at 828.339.4265.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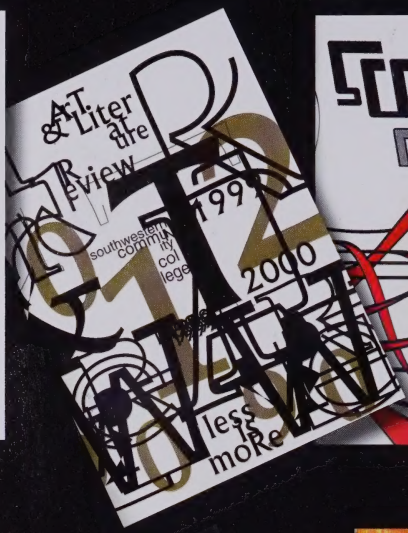
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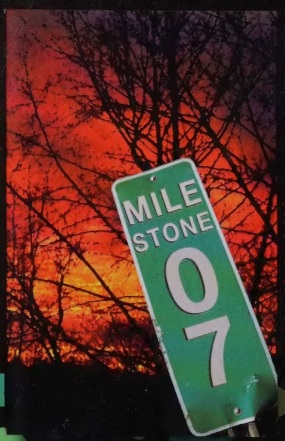
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